Author:
Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

Illustrator:
Chisato Naruse

My Instant Death Ability is So Overpowered, No One in This Other World Stands a Chance Against Me!

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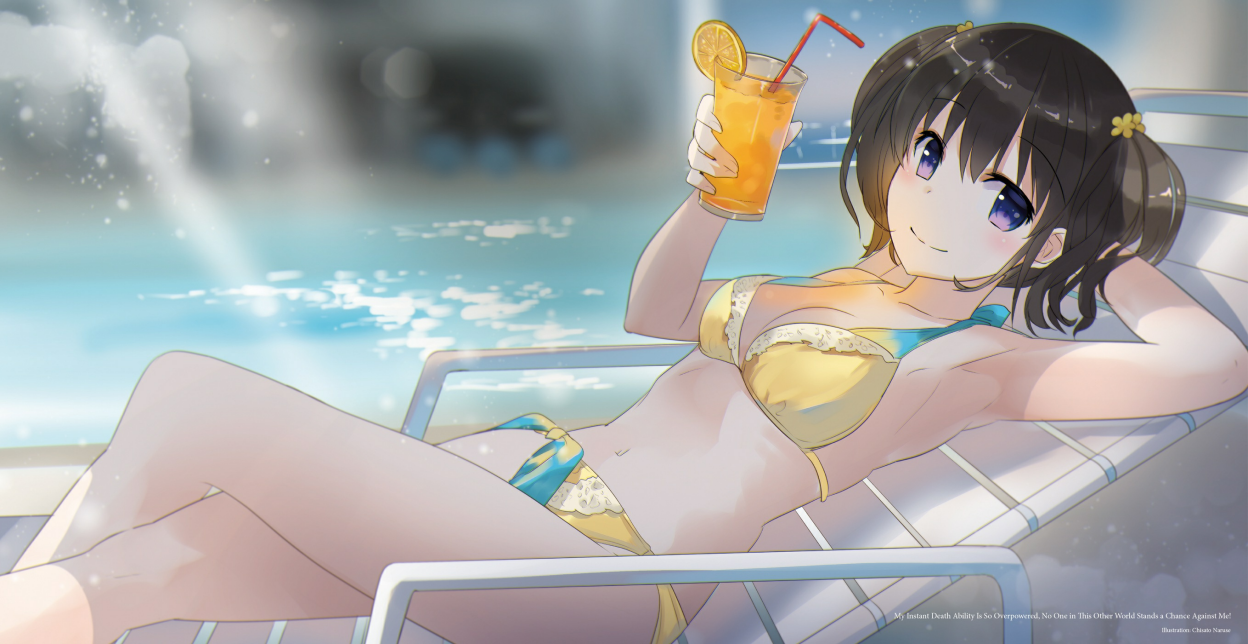

My Instant Death Ability Is So Overpowered, No One in This Other World Stands a Chance Against Me!

Illustration: Chisato Naruse

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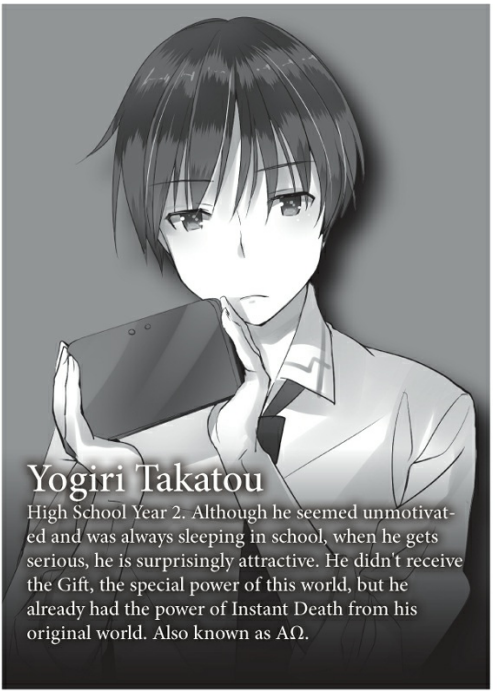
CHARACTERS

Tomochika Dannoura

High School Year 2. Although she looks quite attractive and has quite the ample chest, her role is unfortunately that of the Straight Man. Like Yogiri, she did not receive the power of the Gift, but she is trained in a martial art derived from the ancient Dannoura style of archery.

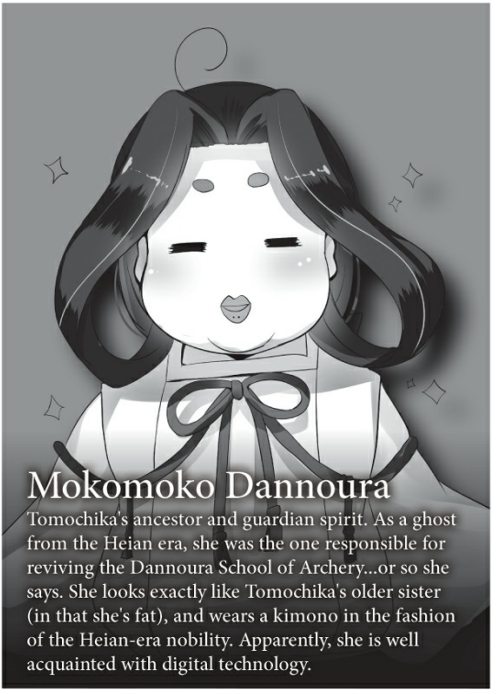


Yogiri Takatou

High School Year 2. Although he seemed unmotivated and was always sleeping in school, when he gets serious, he is surprisingly attractive. He didn't receive the Gift, the special power of this world, but he already had the power of Instant Death from his original world. Also known as AΩ.

Asaka Takatou

A female college student who, while struggling to find work, ended up taking an interview at a suspicious institution known as the Independent Higher Life Form Research Facility, and unfortunately ended up finding work there. She normally ties her long hair up behind her head. At her new work place, she met AΩ, whom she named Yogiri.

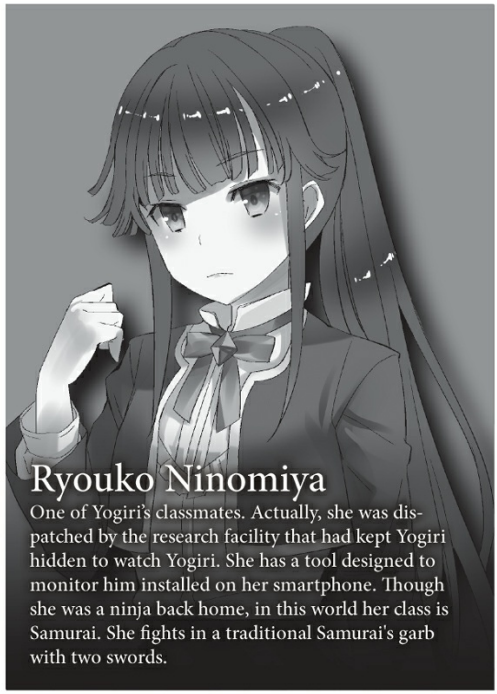


Mokomoko Dannoura

Tomochika's ancestor and guardian spirit. As a ghost from the Heian era, she was the one responsible for reviving the Dannoura School of Archery...or so she says. She looks exactly like Tomochika's older sister (in that she's fat), and wears a kimono in the fashion of the Heian-era nobility. Apparently, she is well acquainted with digital technology.

Carol S. Lane

One of Yogiri's classmates. An American who joined their class as she entered high school. Like Ryouko, she was tasked with monitoring Yogiri, but she works for the Agency. Her class in this world is Ninja, and she wears a red ninja outfit and forehead protector when fighting. Her weapon is a ninja sword.

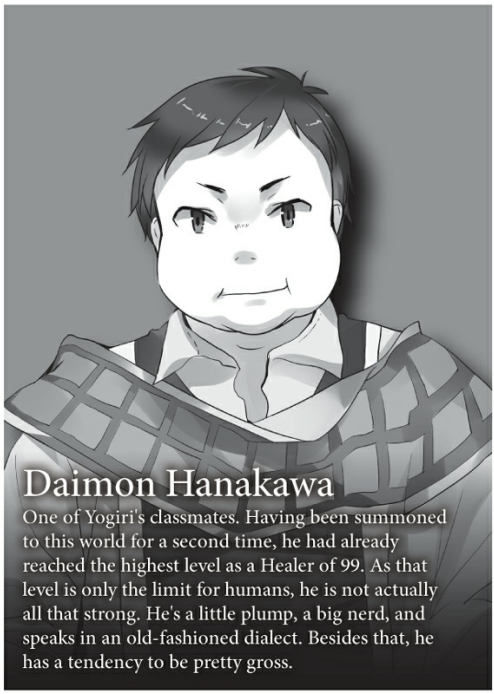


Ryouko Ninomiya

One of Yogiri's classmates. Actually, she was dispatched by the research facility that had kept Yogiri hidden to watch Yogiri. She has a tool designed to monitor him installed on her smartphone. Though she was a ninja back home, in this world her class is Samurai. She fights in a traditional Samurai's garb with two swords.

Risley

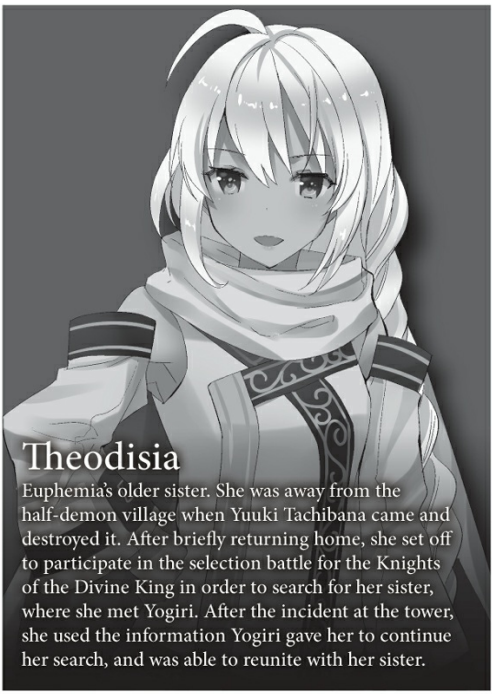
The Sage Lain, being the highest level of vampire known as an Origin Blood, challenged Yogiri in hopes he would be able to put an end to her immortality. As she wished, she died, and left behind this girl, a replica of herself modified to be her ideal. She only has a small part of Lain's memories.



Daimon Hanakawa

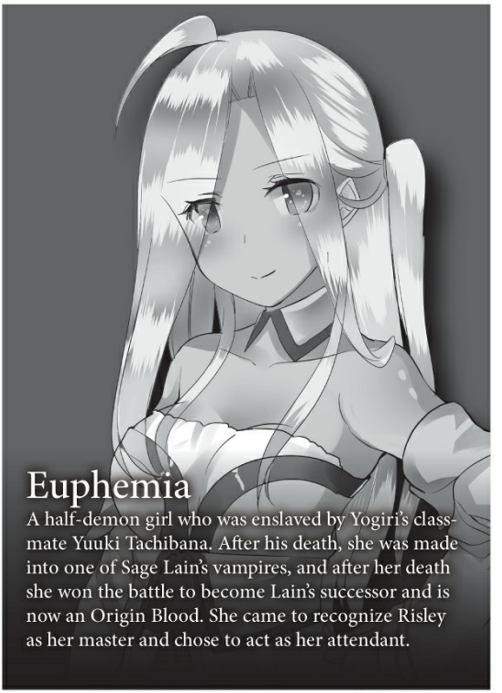
One of Yogiri's classmates. Having been summoned to this world for a second time, he had already reached the highest level as a Healer of 99. As that level is only the limit for humans, he is not actually all that strong. He's a little plump, a big nerd, and speaks in an old-fashioned dialect. Besides that, he has a tendency to be pretty gross.

CHARACTERS



Theodisia

Euphemia's older sister. She was away from the half-demon village when Yuuki Tachibana came and destroyed it. After briefly returning home, she set off to participate in the selection battle for the Knights of the Divine King in order to search for her sister, where she met Yogiri. After the incident at the tower, she used the information Yogiri gave her to continue her search, and was able to reunite with her sister.



Euphemia

A half-demon girl who was enslaved by Yogiri's classmate Yuuki Tachibana. After his death, she was made into one of Sage Lain's vampires, and after her death she won the battle to become Lain's successor and is now an Origin Blood. She came to recognize Risley as her master and chose to act as her attendant.

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ACT 1

Chapter 1 — Mokomoko, I've Been Thinking This for a While, But You've Really Started to Sound Like a Demon Lord

Tomochika and Yogiri continued their journey in the carriage. Their first objective was to reach a port in the Kingdom of Brea. It bordered the Kingdom of Lindy, where the City of the War God was located, so by following the highway, they would be able to reach it in just a few days.

Things had been going smoothly, and just as Tomochika began to think they were safe, the carriage suddenly came to a stop. She immediately feared that something had happened. They'd just finished their lunch break and had made no plans to stop again for a while.

Well, this is a problem, Mokomoko said, floating through the wall. She had been operating the Enju-type robot outside.

"What's wrong?"

Take a look.

As instructed, Tomochika stuck her head out the window and glanced around. There were giant spikes in front of them—large stone pillars with tapered points, sticking up from the middle of the road. They looked like they had fallen from the sky, with the impact of their landing having done significant damage to the highway they were on.

"Oh, that is kind of a problem. Can we not go around them?"

The carriage is only really designed to work on paved roads.

A number of the spikes were spread across the area. Even if they were able to get around the first one somehow, there were plenty more blocking the way.

"That armored truck we had before was so convenient," Yogiri sighed, although it was long gone by now. "I'm kind of sad we lost it."

The region they were currently traveling through was a plateau, so the ground beside the road was fairly rocky. The armored truck would have been

able to drive over it without issue, but the carriage wasn't nearly as capable.

"What if you kill the spikes?" Tomochika suggested.

"They wouldn't be in our way anymore, but the road would still be destroyed. I can't fix that."

Furthermore, it seems we're not the only ones in trouble here, Mokomoko observed.

A short distance away, a number of armed individuals were milling around in confusion. With their attention on the spikes, the teens hadn't noticed them right away.

The soldiers continued to scream as more objects fell from the sky. Crushing the men underneath, they embedded themselves deep into the rocky ground, kicking up clouds of dirt and debris. When the two teens looked closer, they could see a dark red color covering the base of the spikes. It appeared the pillars were being aimed specifically at the soldiers.

"Shouldn't we run away?!"

"We should be fine for now. But I guess we can't just hang around indefinitely." Yogiri had the power to detect any kind of threat to their safety. According to that ability, they weren't in any immediate danger, but he didn't know how long that would last.

A woman's voice suddenly cut in. *I am one who bears the title of Demon Lord. I would never flee and hide, but this resistance is truly futile. Why are you targeting me?*

"Mokomoko, I've been thinking this for a while, but you've really started to sound like a Demon Lord recently," Tomochika commented.

Why would I suddenly start acting like a Demon Lord?!

"Oh, it's coming from this," Yogiri explained, pulling a small jewel from his uniform pocket. It was a magical tool for translation, given to him by the concierge Celestina. It was meant to be a necklace, but Yogiri had found wearing it to be a nuisance, so he had taken it off the string and carried it around instead.

Hm. It seems it's picking up someone's voice from a public channel and translating it out loud.

"What do you mean?"

It's like that cliché: "You want power? Then I'll give it to you." You know, that kind of voice always comes from nowhere in particular!

"That's a weird way of explaining it. You mean like telepathy?"

Sure, if you like.

Those who possessed the Gift could communicate with each other, and this tool translated their communications.

Silence, Demon Lord! You must be punished for the pain you've inflicted on the innocent! Accept your fate and be destroyed!

Hm. Isn't it your own fault for getting in the way of my activities?

What?!

We were simply enjoying some hunting, preying on what was conveniently nearby. You lot do the same thing all the time, do you not?

Humans aren't just animals!

True, humans are much more intelligent. So if you know you are being hunted, you should move. Why do you refuse to do so? Why do you make such reckless attempts on my life? In the end, I suppose you aren't so different from the animals you *hunt.*

They could hear not only the Demon Lord's voice but also someone who seemed to be a hero. Neither of the speakers were in view, but they were clearly arguing while they fought.

"Can't you have your final battle at the Demon Lord's castle or something?!" Tomochika shouted, irritated by the nuisance their fight was causing her own group.

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The situation was this: the pair had just happened to pass through the location of the final battle between a hero and a Demon Lord. It was extremely unlikely that they would come across such an event by chance, but technically not impossible. In this case, it was purely coincidence. They hadn't been looking to witness such a battle, nor were they interested in getting involved.

Demon Lords didn't present much of a threat to the world as a whole and were only dangerous to the inhabitants of their nearby surroundings. They were the leaders of demonic kingdoms, so if one of them came to blows with a hero, it essentially amounted to a conflict between countries. The battle wouldn't have much of an effect on anyone else. If the Demon Lord's side were to win, it would only change the balance of power in the immediate area. There wasn't much for Tomochika and Yogiri to worry about.

“I guess we should start by assessing the situation,” Yogiri said.

Indeed. At present, we have not been directly harmed, but we can’t sit back and relax.

“Can you have a bit more of a reaction please?!” Tomochika demanded. “This is a hero and a Demon Lord! It’s the most fantasy-like development we’ve seen yet!”

“Wasn’t Hanakawa one of those ‘heroes’? They probably aren’t all that rare.”

“Yeah, last time Hanakawa came to this world, he was part of the heroes’ party, and they defeated a Demon Lord, right?”

There must have been a number of demonic kingdoms, and for the most part they stood in opposition to the human ones. Nearby countries would see them as a threat, so as a means of fighting them, they would occasionally summon warriors from other worlds.

“Speaking of which, why do they bother summoning otherworlders anyway?” Yogiri wondered.

“You’re just asking that now?”

Apparently, those who come from other worlds have a higher likelihood of manifesting a stronger form of the Gift. Even Hanakawa and his companions were reasonably strong compared to the locals.

“Hanakawa isn’t important right now,” Yogiri replied. “What should we do here?”

“Let’s go back,” Tomochika suggested. “It doesn’t look like we can use the road either way.”

“Are there any other routes we can take?”

Our path was more or less a straight shot. Even if we turn back, there may not be another way forward for the carriage.

“So I guess we just have to push ahead somehow? Maybe leave the carriage behind and ride the horse?”

The horse did belong to the Invincible Battalion. It should be able to manage on a damaged road like this, but I thought you couldn’t ride one.

“Can’t we just ride double?”

“It’s not impossible, but it’ll be pretty rough if you’re not used to it.”

“I’m sure it’s better than walking. We just need to get to the port.”

Their luggage was all stored in Yogiri’s pack, so that was all they would have to bring with them. It was a magical bag that could carry far more than

its size suggested. It currently contained sufficient camping and food supplies, so even without the carriage, they weren't likely to have a problem.

What?! The Demon Lord!

You did it, Yoshimasa!

As they got ready to leave the carriage behind, they heard another voice.

"Huh? What was that?" Tomochika asked, immediately getting a bad feeling.

"Oh, the Demon Lord or whatever used an area attack that would have hit us."

"I figured it was something like that!"

Although they'd had no intention of interfering in the fight, Yogiri had ended up doing so automatically.

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Chapter 2 — Are You Sure You Should Be Killing Off Demon Lords Just Like That?!

"Are you sure you should be killing off Demon Lords just like that?!"

For a moment, Tomochika had accepted Yogiri's response, but in the end she couldn't help but feel it was going to cause more problems. Judging from the conversation they'd overheard, there was a considerable history behind the fight, and ending it like that might have cast shame on the hero.

"There was nothing I could do. It looked like we were going to get hit," Yogiri answered plainly, giving no indication that he felt any sort of guilt. But there was no point expecting any remorse from him. He had only used his power because he'd been forced to. "Actually, more than the Demon Lord, aren't you curious about the hero?"

"What makes you say that?" They'd merely stumbled across the battle by chance. The hero wasn't of any importance to them.

"When Hanakawa's group defeated their Demon Lord, they were forcibly sent back home, remember? So this hero might also end up being sent back. He might be able to give us a hint about how to get back ourselves."

"Just because he's a hero doesn't mean he was summoned, does it?"

"Indeed, it is quite complex, but there are several types of heroes."

"Huh? Mokomoko?"

The Enju robot, who had been driving the carriage up until that point, suddenly joined them inside. At some point, Mokomoko's own ethereal body had vanished.

"I have gone to have a look at the hero. I figured I could use Enju to communicate my findings."

"What was that about different kinds of heroes?" Yogiri asked.

Mokomoko began to explain, speaking through the android. First, there was the class known as "Hero." It was a class related to the Swordmasters,

and while it boasted enormous combat potential, it wasn't directly related to the extermination of the Demon Lords. Those summoned from other worlds in order to fight Demon Lords were also called heroes. Their class wasn't "Hero" but rather something more personal to each of them.

"Why is it so confusing?! Couldn't they have named them a bit more clearly?"

"Not much I can do about that."

"Well, there's no harm in checking it out, right?" Yogiri asked.

"Exactly. If those heroes came from our world, there may be some method by which we can return home with them. We received the coordinates for our home world from Sion, but there is no guarantee they are correct. Trying another approach might be worth the effort." That was why Mokomoko had decided to go inspect the heroes on her own.

"Are they even still there?" Tomochika asked, recalling how bitter Hanakawa had been about being sent back so promptly.

"Oh yeah, I suppose they might have been teleported home immediately."

"There seems to be an issue," Mokomoko observed. "They haven't returned to their world yet, but... Well, let me start by explaining what I'm seeing."

◇ ◇ ◇

Soon after entering the domain of the Kingdom of Brea, if a person left the road and walked for a time, they would eventually reach the cliff where the Demon Lord and the heroes were fighting.

The Demon Lord was alone, but the heroes had brought an army along. That said, it was ultimately still a battle between the Demon Lord and a party of four. The rest of the heroes' companions were unable to do anything, being continuously pelted with stone pillars falling from the sky. It must have been a sort of filter for the Demon Lord, as if to say, "If you can't deal with an attack like this, you have no right to stand before me."

We were simply enjoying some hunting, preying on what was conveniently nearby. You lot do the same thing all the time, do you not?

With her back to the wall stood a young girl with horns protruding from her head—the Demon Lord Tesla. She was the leader of the demons who operated in the area around the Kingdom of Brea.

Tesla was forcing her thoughts directly into the others' minds. For those weak of heart, that was enough to force them to kneel down before her. It was yet another method of screening her opponents. As this was a hunting excursion, she was trying to determine who was actually worth her time. The four who had passed her tests were the hero Hellion, the hero Yoshimasa, the Court Mage Rimlette, and the High Priestess Mimir.

"Humans aren't just animals!"

Yoshimasa couldn't help but roll his eyes at the way Hellion raged at the perceived injustice. Having been summoned from another world against his will, Yoshimasa himself didn't really care one way or another about what the Demon Lord or her underlings tried to do. *Stop with all the talk and just fight already. And if you're a real hero, do it yourself.*

As he was thinking that, Rimlette whispered in his ear, "My, my. Why do you look like you're sitting back and watching someone else's business?"

"If we're fighting a Demon Lord, we should be able to leave it to a real hero."

Hellion had received his Gift from a Swordmaster and had been given the actual class of Hero. He boasted superior abilities in all domains. Yoshimasa wouldn't have found it strange if Hellion could have defeated the Demon Lord single-handedly, while in contrast, he was just an average middle-aged man. He had no power that was useful for fighting, being little more than the worn-out individual his appearance suggested. Fighting had never been a realistic goal for him.

"You really are a poor learner, aren't you? I told you, we're going to fight together."

Yoshimasa felt like he could hear a snapping sound come from his right hand as a brutal pain ran through his little finger. It was something he had experienced plenty of times before—the pain of the finger breaking. In fact, the finger hadn't *actually* been broken, but the sensation felt plenty real. It was a restraint that had been placed on him the moment he'd been summoned to this world. Without inflicting any actual harm, Rimlette could cause him constant pain.

"No matter how much you hurt me," he gasped, his face pale, "it's still better than dying."

There were numerous ways to control those summoned from other worlds, but the method Rimlette had chosen was extreme. Yoshimasa could

effectively be tortured into doing whatever he was told. Among the various possible methods, this was one of the worst. And by using such a technique on him, it left him unable to fight properly anyway.

"Is that so? There are some things worse than death, you know? Well, for now let's just watch. It *is* possible that Hellion will defeat the Demon Lord with ease."

Yoshimasa's class was Servant. His ability was to convert his life force into magical energy, so it was something he didn't want to use recklessly.

"Take this!" Hellion drew his holy sword, sweeping it horizontally. The slash cut through the air, flying towards the Demon Lord, who didn't so much as move. She made no effort to dodge or block the attack, taking the hit straight on.

"How dull. I thought you would be different from the usual assassins."

She was perfectly calm. Hellion's attack hadn't caused her any pain. An instant later, she was standing directly in front of him. The hero couldn't even react before she put a hand on his shoulder, crushing him into the ground just by pushing down.

The other three were dumbstruck. They had never imagined Hellion being defeated so easily. They'd known the Demon Lord was strong, but they had expected much more of a fight.

"Now then," Tesla said, "shall we continue like this, one at a time?"

The heroes shrank back. This Demon Lord would have had no trouble wiping out the entire party, but she didn't attack.

"Lord Hellion's—What do we do?" High Priestess Mimir was clearly in shock. With their true hero out of the picture, their fighting strength had dropped sharply. Mimir had no particularly strong attacks, and Yoshimasa might as well have been completely incapable of fighting. The Court Mage Rimlette was their last hope.

"Bringing you along was the right choice after all," Rimlette remarked, turning to her captive hero. "About fifty years of your life's worth of magical energy should be enough to win."

"Don't be ridiculous! What's the point of winning with a cost like that?!"

Yoshimasa had been summoned at the age of twenty-five, and even using his ability extremely sparingly, had already aged to thirty-five. If he used another fifty years of his life, he would be eighty-five. And there was a high chance the process would exhaust his remaining lifespan and simply kill him.

“The Demon Lord and hero both kill each other, bringing peace to the world. It’s a pretty common story, don’t you think?”

A sudden stabbing pain struck him as Rimlette spoke, causing him to crumple to the ground. It felt like a sword had plunged straight into his gut, making it impossible for him to stand.

“W-Wait, please! That’s too much!” Imagining the pain that awaited him, Yoshimasa began to beg, but he knew that Rimlette wouldn’t stop. He screamed as he felt the imaginary blade in his stomach begin to dig around inside him.

“Hm? Are you having a falling-out?” Even the Demon Lord was confused by Yoshimasa’s sudden wailing.

“What shall I try next? Perhaps tearing your fingers off one by one?”

“Stop...please, sto—” Yoshimasa’s supplication was cut off by another scream. He closed his hands around his right eye, writhing on the ground as he felt his eyeball being scooped from his skull. “T-Twenty years! Please, just take twenty years!”

“I suppose that’s enough. If I took fifty all at once, you might just collapse.” If the hero consumed more than his remaining lifespan, the power wouldn’t actually work. Rimlette couldn’t care less about Yoshimasa’s life, but there was no point in killing him without gaining something from it.

“I don’t really understand what you’re doing,” the Demon Lord mused, watching leisurely from afar, “but it appears you’ve come to an agreement.”

“Come on, hurry up. If you don’t, I’ll impale you from your rear through to your mouth.”

“Dammit! Fine, I’ll do it!”

Yoshimasa grabbed his right wrist with his left hand, pouring his power into it. He could feel something sliding out of his body—twenty years of his life. It manifested as a ball of glowing light above his palm, and at the same time his body began to wither. In an instant, he had aged to fifty-five years old.

Rimlette took the glowing sphere of power. That was what she had been willing to torture him for. Normally, one would be concerned that forcing another to fight by torturing them would negatively impact their performance, but in Yoshimasa’s case, all he had to do was give up his life force. The concentration of magical energy produced could then be used by someone else.

“So, two of you at once, is it? That’s fine.”

“Take this!” Rimlette swung her staff. A magic circle appeared around the Demon Lord, and she was immediately consumed by fire. A tremendous pillar of flames stretched up into the sky, erupting from the ground underneath her.

“Did we get her?!”

They had won. Even a Demon Lord couldn’t have survived that kind of attack. Yoshimasa turned to Rimlette, hoping to see that same conviction on her face, but she had gone pale. He wasn’t entirely sure how her magic worked, but from the look on the mage’s face, he could tell that she hadn’t succeeded.

The flames faded and a figure emerged. The Demon Lord showed no sign of having taken any damage. The young girl hadn’t been so much as singed.

“That was impressive. Just for a moment, I actually had to focus on defense. But your follow-up needs work. I didn’t even move. Why did you not keep attacking?”

Rimlette had already expended all of her power, and Yoshimasa couldn’t use his ability in rapid succession.

“Then I suppose it’s time for my rebuttal. It would be an insult to sit here and take your attacks forever. Allow me to give you a suitable response.”

The Demon Lord floated up into the air, facing a palm towards the trio. Yoshimasa could tell that she was gathering power, and before long, flames began to appear in her hand, growing rapidly in size.

“What the... How big is she planning on making it?” he muttered in awe.

“That’s not just a ball of fire. It’s a ball of intensely concentrated magical energy. And yet it’s still so large...” Rimlette murmured, the shock plain on her face. Even Yoshimasa, with no knowledge of magic at all, could tell it was something phenomenal.

“There’s no way we can win...” Mimir whimpered.

As if they had already given up, the three stood there dumbly, watching the sphere of flames grow. The super-compressed energy in that ball of power would no doubt incinerate the entire countryside when it was released.

“Dammit! No one told me it would be like this!” Yoshimasa cried out. “Didn’t you say that with my power you could defeat the Demon Lord?!”

Then the fireball was unleashed into the sky. Perhaps Tesla was just that relaxed, or perhaps she was only trying to threaten them. Yoshimasa watched

the Demon Lord, failing to understand what was really going on.

Tesla fell. Straight down. The palm where the fire had been gathering was now facing the sky. She struck the ground with a dull sound and after a short bounce stopped moving.

"What?! The Demon Lord!"

"You did it, Yoshimasa!"

Mimir began to praise him, but he had no idea what had just happened. Having calmed down, Rimlette shot a small ball of fire at the Demon Lord's body. The corpse was immediately incinerated, burning away to ash.

Yoshimasa couldn't figure out how, but the Demon Lord was dead.

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The Demon Lord was dead. But since Yoshimasa was still standing there, Rimlette was suspicious. His contract was only meant to last until the Demon Lord's death. Once she had been defeated, the outsider should have returned to his original world immediately. That was the arrangement, but he hadn't disappeared yet. It made her wonder if what they had just defeated was truly a Demon Lord.

"Oh? I didn't even know you could make a face like that," Yoshimasa retorted, prompting Rimlette to reflexively activate the curse. Whenever he insulted her, she instantly punished him. It was a habit she had developed from her experience with training people from other worlds. She sent over the image of his right elbow being smashed, but Yoshimasa's smirking face didn't change.

"Hey now, did you forget? That curse was only valid until the Demon Lord's demise."

The curse that kept the young man under her control was tied to his summoning contract. If the contract had been fulfilled, the curse would cease to function. That was obviously what was happening now, so why hadn't he been sent back to his own world?

"He has come over to our side, so the moment his contract was fulfilled, we cut his ties to his home world."

At some point, a man had appeared beside them. Horns were growing from his head—proof that he was a demon.

"We promised to take him in on condition that he slew Tesla."

“That’s right,” Yoshimasa added. “This guy managed to lure the Demon Lord way out here for us.”

Rimlette hadn’t even considered the possibility that Tesla acting alone had been the result of someone else’s scheme. She’d merely thought that her side had been given a once-in-a-lifetime stroke of luck.

“To what end?” The situation was fairly bad, but Rimlette maintained her composure.

“So that I can do whatever I like, of course. I’ve had an awful experience so far, wouldn’t you agree?”

As Yoshimasa spoke, the High Priestess stepped up beside him.

“You too?” gasped Rimlette.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “I’m the one who introduced him to the demons. I wanted to be with him...”

The hero put a hand on Mimir’s shoulder. “This is how it’s going to be. Now, if I get to do whatever I like, I’m gonna have to start by taking my revenge on you. I need to make up for the thirty years you stole from me, right?”

“And what can a Servant like you do?”

“Actually, now that the connection to my home world has been cut, I can use my power’s full potential.”

Rimlette felt a chill run down her spine. He was doing something to her, and it didn’t take long for her to figure out what. A ball of light appeared above Yoshimasa’s palm, a concentration of power born by converting one’s lifespan. Rimlette noticed immediately that it had come from her own body.

“When it comes to the Servant class, there’s no requirement that you convert your own life force. I’m now able to take anyone’s.”

“Give it back!”

“This would be about seventy years, wouldn’t it? I wasn’t worried about you dying or anything, but are you even human? You don’t look any different.”

Yoshimasa cradled the sphere of light to his chest. The energy was absorbed into his body, and his age immediately began to rewind. He now looked even younger than when he’d first been summoned, appearing to be around twenty. He could freely control his age with the life force he had leeched.

In an instant, their positions had been reversed, and Rimlette felt her heart

being thrown into a pit of despair.

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“So, that’s basically what happened.”

“Could it be more complicated?! I don’t entirely understand what they’re doing over there.”

Inside the carriage, Mokomoko had just concluded her explanation of the events unfolding between the heroes by way of the Enju robot.

“I arrived in the middle, so I don’t know every detail, but it does seem like a rather puzzling situation.”

Tomochika didn’t appreciate her guardian spirit leaving it at that. She felt the complexity of the situation deserved a bit more clarification.

“Is the guy who was summoned Japanese?” Yogiri asked.

“He certainly seems to be.”

“You said they cut his connection? I assume that means his connection to our world?”

Tomochika knew that if a part of someone was left behind in their home world, they could use it as a lifeline to pull themselves back. At least, that’s what they had heard from an Aggressor they had previously encountered. It sounded like this Yoshimasa had been in a similar situation.

“And when they cut that connection, he got stronger?” Tomochika asked.

“Indeed. How can I put it? Before cutting the connection, a portion of his power was being used to maintain it. The reason you were summoned here without that connection to our world was because they were hoping to make you as strong as possible.”

It was often inconvenient to have someone remain after their purpose had been served, so when a person was summoned from another world, some sort of connection to their home world was normally maintained.

“I guess we can leave the hero alone, then,” Yogiri said. “It’ll be a pain if they notice us, so let’s hurry up and get on the horse and go.”

“Wait, wait, wait! Are you really planning on ignoring them?!”

“There’s no way they’ll have advice for getting us back home now. What’s the point of getting involved?”

“I mean, you’re not wrong...” It did seem like a situation they probably shouldn’t stick their noses into.

“Yes, well, about that. Actually, I’ve been caught.”

“What?! How?!” Tomochika blurted out in response to Mokomoko’s sudden confession.

“They just sort of grabbed me.”

“Mokomoko...after all that proudly declaring that you’re some high-level divine spirit...” Tomochika muttered, turning cold eyes towards the robot.

“Things like this don’t normally happen! But I was preoccupied with controlling Enju! And I never thought they would notice I was there!”

“I guess we have no choice now.” Yogiri stepped out of the carriage, Tomochika close behind him. They couldn’t just abandon the Dannoura ghost.

Chapter 3 — I Feel Like “Three Demon Generals” Is Missing Something

Hm. I came to observe the situation here, but there don’t appear to be any clues about how to get back.

The battle between the heroes and the Demon Lord had ended with the heroes’ victory. In truth, Yogiri was the one who had ended the Demon Lord, but the heroes would never have imagined that some random person could kill her from such a distance. So despite the bizarre circumstances, things were continuing to move forward.

Perhaps the trio had come to the conclusion that the previous attack had been successful after all. The party quickly collapsed, with the mage Rimlette being the only one left on humanity’s side. On the demons’ side were the hero Yoshimasa, the High Priestess Mimir, and a man with horns growing from his head.

“I-I’m sorry! But we defeated the Demon Lord. Now you can go back home, right?” Rimlette pleaded desperately. It seemed she had been the one to summon Yoshimasa.

“I thought you would be much more upset about having years of your life taken away. It looks like seventy years didn’t faze you at all.”

“W-Well...”

“Maybe there’re more people like me out there? Did you steal their lives too? Wow, you’re the worst.”

Rimlette fell silent as if to say he was right on the mark. Mokomoko didn’t know the specifics, but this mage was obviously able to stock up on other people’s life forces.

“Well, I guess I don’t mind going back.”

“Really?!”

“But too bad! I have no idea how to do that. Or do you think you can send me back?”

The mage’s face twisted into a bitter expression. Putting aside the lifespan

issue, it seemed she just wanted to get the situation back under control. There were plenty of issues that needed to be dealt with, but returning Yoshimasa to his home world would at least solve one of them.

Unfortunately, that was now impossible. His connection to his world had been severed. As far as Mokomoko knew, there were few methods to get back once that happened, and they were incredibly difficult.

"All I've got waiting for me if I go home is a dead-end office job. So why shouldn't I try living as a hero here? Or I guess it would be as a general of the Demon Lord's army now. Don't you think that sounds like much more fun?"

"So you've chosen to betray us."

"I was summoned here against my will, threatened, and tortured. I'd hardly call it a betrayal. Did you really think I'd be your friend once I was free?"

Recognizing that things weren't going well, Rimlette changed targets. "Mimir! Why would you do this?! How could a High Priestess, of all people, get involved with demons?!"

"I'm sorry. I was actually a demon from the start, so it's not really a betrayal. I was able to make contact with Oryphes because we're both demon generals," Mimir explained apologetically. The slender demon beside her must have been Oryphes.

"What? How can a High Priestess be a demon?" Even from a distance, Mokomoko could see how bewildered this revelation had left the mage.

"Oh, I *am* a legitimate priestess of Malnarilna. When I prayed at the church, the answer I got was, 'That's fine. That sounds like fun. Be the priest you want to be!' The oracles of the Malnarilna sect are an absolute authority, so even someone completely unknown like me was able to rise to the rank of High Priestess without a problem."

"I have more questions about that, but putting them aside for now, what about you is actually demonic? I find it hard to believe that a demon could blend in with human society..."

"Ah, well, demons and humans don't really look different, so if I hadn't said anything, I'd never have been discovered. The horns are just traditional hair decoration."

As Mimir said that, Oryphes reached up and removed his own horns with a single, graceful motion. "Apologies for the late introduction. My name is Oryphes, and I am currently serving as a demon general."

“Wh-What?! This makes no sense!” Rimlette finally lost her composure. Of course, having arrived on the scene late, Mokomoko didn’t know exactly what had happened between them.

“There were a lot of people who resented Tesla becoming the Demon Lord just because she was the daughter of the previous one,” Yoshimasa said, although he didn’t seem to know the details all that well.

“Ah! Shall we tell you all about it as a final souvenir for your trip to hell?” Oryphes asked excitedly.

“I’ve never met someone who actually used that phrase before.”

“I wanted to try saying it once.” Of course, even if he wasn’t entirely serious, it didn’t seem like he had any intention of letting her live.

“Wait a second!” As Oryphes opened his mouth to explain, a voice called out to stop him. At some point, another person had appeared—a woman in flashy clothes, with horns on her head, now stood beside him.

“Well, look who it is. What brings you here, Exia? I didn’t expect all three demon generals to be gathered together.”

“I was just observing to make sure things went smoothly. But Oryphes, you’ve let your guard down.”

“Oh? What do you mean?”

“You’re being watched. It’s not such a big deal, but I can’t have you prattling away without realizing it.”

This is bad! Mokomoko immediately realized that they were talking about her, but it was too late. Something was already behind her. Before she could so much as turn around, it had grabbed her head.

What?!

Mokomoko was a spirit. It was difficult for someone who didn’t know that she existed to even perceive her, and she couldn’t be restrained by any physical means. But whoever was behind her was somehow able to do just that.

“That is the Lord of Specters, one of the spirits in my service. I thought it would be too much for a small-fry ghost, but you’re surprisingly tough.”

The spirit called the Lord of Specters was overflowing with killing intent. It was trying to crush Mokomoko’s head and erase her completely.

I want to offer a retort about being called a small fry, but I can’t even move enough to reply!

Completely stuck, she had no option but to ask Yogiri and Tomochika for

help.

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“I feel like ‘Three Demon Generals’ is missing something, don’t you think? Even if you don’t go as far as the Twelve Divine Generals, you’d think they’d at least try to match the Four Heavenly Kings.”

“I’m about to be erased, and that’s all you can think about?!”

“I hear what you’re saying, but it doesn’t sound very convincing.”

Yogiri, Tomochika, and Enju were outside the carriage, making preparations to move on. Their current plan was to use the horse to retrieve Mokomoko and then immediately leave the area.

“Young man, I would be quite grateful if you could dispatch this Lord of Specters currently holding on to me!”

Although Mokomoko’s voice sounded rather pathetic, the android she was speaking through simply continued to separate the horse from the carriage.

“Sorry, but if he’s not attacking me, I can’t do much about it. I can’t really kill something when I’m not sure it’s even real.”

“But you kill people without even knowing where they are all the time!”

“It would be different if I could at least see it, but when I have no way to perceive it... Oh, I guess there is something I can do.”

“Oh! What’s that?”

“I can kill *you* wherever you are. If you’re suffering too much, I can put you out of your misery.”

“That’s not funny when it’s coming from you, so please don’t say things like that! In that case, I’d be better off letting myself get crushed and trying to reassemble myself afterwards!”

The horse was finally ready. As it was large enough to pull the carriage alone, it was certainly capable of carrying three riders at once. It still had its invincible armor on, complete with saddle, but the issue was how to fit three people on it.

“Put Yogiri in the middle since he has no experience, Mokomoko can go in front, and I’ll sit in the back and hold the reins.”

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For now, that was the best they could manage. They tried it out, but there was a problem with the suggested setup after all: they had to sit squished very close together. Tomochika couldn't help but hesitate at the thought of having to press herself so tightly to Yogiri's back.

"I realize you're probably having fun with the idea of pressing them into him and all, but while you're doing your little love comedy routine, I'm about to be crushed..."

"I'm not doing it because I want to!"

Mokomoko was dead serious.

Chapter 4 — This Is the Most Fun I've Had Since Coming to This World

"I have to say, it bothers me how much you seem to be enjoying this while I'm suffering!" Mokomoko cried.

"This is the most fun I've had since coming to this world," replied Yogiri.

"Not that it has anything to do with this world!" added Tomochika. But she eventually gave up and accepted that she would have to sit tightly squished between the other two.

If she spent too much time sitting around and complaining, there was a chance that Mokomoko would disappear forever. To reach her in time, their only option was to ride the horse, and the only practical way of doing that was to sit behind Yogiri as Tomochika herself controlled the reins.

"So, we're going to grab Mokomoko and just keep running until we reach the port. That's the plan, right?" she confirmed.

The heroes and the Demon Lord had been fighting along the edge of a cliff. The idea was to ride until they found them, get rid of whatever was restraining Mokomoko, and run away. Their plan was not the strongest.

"The problem is whether we'll be able to deal with the thing holding her," Yogiri said. "We'll only have one chance."

"What?!" cried Mokobot. "You can try as many times as you like!"

"Mokomoko, couldn't you stop controlling Enju and make an actual effort to escape on your own?" Tomochika asked.

"If I hadn't already been caught, I would have been capable of doing that. However, it is currently taking all my strength to just prevent myself from being destroyed."

While they were speaking, the horse was running full tilt, and the cliff soon came into view. Tomochika's superior eyesight was easily able to pick up the demons and her family ghost. They hadn't been noticed yet.

"I don't think this will work," Yogiri commented once they were close enough in range for him to see as well. "I can see Mokomoko but not the

thing that's holding her."

"So what now? Should we just leave her and go?"

"Have you forgotten you won't be able to return home without my help?!"

"Let's try talking to them," Yogiri suggested. "The heroes and the Demon Lord have no connection to us. We might be able to convince them to let her go."

"Yeah... There is no way this will go well."

As Tomochika was remembering Yogiri's previous displays of "negotiating skills," a ball of light flew towards them from the gathered demons. Her first thought was that it was an attack of some sort, but the light drew a steep arc that took it straight into the ground, which then began to shake. Even their mount, fortified by the armor of the Invincible Battalion, was forced to stop.

"It doesn't look like it was targeting us." Yogiri hadn't felt any killing intent directed their way.

The ground continued to shake, and the plateau in front of them began to transform. Pillars rose up from the ground, stretching as far as the eye could see, blocking their view of Mokomoko.

"This looks pretty dangerous, doesn't it?" Once again, Tomochika considered turning right around and leaving.

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"So, now that the Demon Lord is dead, you'll let me into your army like you promised, right?" Yoshimasa asked.

The demons had a rigidly hierarchical society, and it was impossible for those of lower standing to directly harm those above them. That inhibition was welded into their racial makeup, making it impossible for them to carry out any sort of attack against their superiors. No matter how strong they were, even if they were more powerful than the Demon Lord herself, it was impossible for them to act on it and defeat her to take her place.

That was why they had used Yoshimasa. They'd needed someone entirely separate from their society to fight the Demon Lord on their behalf. Conspiring with a third party didn't qualify as violating their inherent limitations, so the demons had begun putting enemies of suitable levels before prospective heroes to help them grow, and leaving legendary weapons

in their paths all over the place.

If any human became an actual threat to them, they could easily be dispatched. Such frail creatures like heroes being allowed to exist at all was strictly at the pleasure of the demon realm. Throughout history, Demon Lords had been overpowered and defeated by heroes many times. But in most cases, that was due to demons working behind the scenes to secure more power for themselves. This particular incident had been a plot cooked up by the three demon generals to stage a coup d'état, replacing the old Demon Lord with a new one.

"Yes, just as I promised."

Yoshimasa felt no lie in Oryphes's words, but it wasn't because the demon was a sincere, honest individual. Rather, it seemed like Oryphes simply didn't care about him at all. Yoshimasa wasn't a true hero. The one with the full support and legendary equipment had been Hellion. The demons had expected results from him and hadn't cared about Yoshimasa in the first place. If not for Mimir trying to get close to him, he never would have known that. All of this was thanks to her. He had no value of his own to offer and could provide nothing of use if welcomed into the demon's army. But he had been permitted to join them, as if he were some pet of Mimir's.

Not long before, Yoshimasa would have had no problem accepting that as his lot. He knew that if he continued to indulge Mimir, he could live a decent enough life, and it wasn't as if there were other options open to him. But now he was different. The majority of his power was no longer being held in reserve to send him back home, so he was finally able to wield it fully. With that new power, he felt he would have been able to defeat the Demon Lord on his own, so being looked down on by these demon generals infuriated him.

"Hey, Mimir, how old is Oryphes?"

"Oh, I'd guess about five hundred years?"

"All right, I'll take five hundred years, then."

Having heard that demons lived for about a thousand years, Yoshimasa casually stripped Oryphes of his lifespan. If he ended up taking it all, the demon would die, but that was unavoidable.

"Impossible!" Oryphes's face, which had been relaxed and composed, suddenly twisted in fear. He must have never believed he could become a target or that Yoshimasa's power would even affect him.

"Looks like it works on demons," Yoshimasa commented. "Even demon

generals."

Oryphes's appearance hadn't changed in the slightest. Apparently, five hundred years wasn't much to him after all. A sphere of light now hovered above Yoshimasa's palm, containing five hundred years' worth of magical energy. Though it didn't look any different from the light of seventy years that he had extracted from his earlier foe, he could feel a distinct difference in power between them.

"I can't use magic myself, so there's nothing much for me to do with this energy. But I wonder what will happen if I try something like this?"

He threw the ball of light in a random direction. It drew a steep curve through the air, arcing down towards the ground, where it sank into the earth. The ground immediately began to shake before bulging upwards. Countless pillars shot up, naked humans appearing from within them.

"Oh, I see! How's that? Not only can I take life, I can give it too! I can make people from soil! That's awesome! This is more like control over life and death itself rather than simply controlling someone's lifespan! If I can do this, does it make me God?"

The people who had appeared all seemed to be around twenty years old. Mathematically, from a five-hundred-year lifespan, the number of people he could create at that age should have been limited to twenty-five. But there were far more than that—so many that even those within their field of view defied counting.

"Oh, Yoshimasa...the way you suddenly became so arrogant right after gaining power... That's exactly what I like about you," Mimir breathed, staring at him, totally spellbound.

"You bastard!"

"How about a hundred million years, then?"

Before Oryphes could try anything, Yoshimasa took a hundred million years of his life. If the demon died, he would gain nothing from it, but since the only thing he desired was to kill his target, this was the fastest way.

Oryphes collapsed to the ground. As Yoshimasa had guessed, even a demon general couldn't have a lifespan *that* absurd.

"This is amazing!" he laughed. "It's like I'm cheating! Like I can just inflict instant death at will! Isn't this against the rules? Is there anyone who could even beat me?" Staring down at Oryphes's body, he felt omnipotent.

"You knew this would happen, didn't you, Mimir?" Exia asked, breaking

her silence.

"Yes. I predicted that if Yoshimasa awakened his true powers, it would turn out this way, and I didn't say anything."

"Oh, don't worry, I don't kill women," the former hero interrupted. "I'll let you live. Assuming you don't do anything stupid, of course!"

"And I am a High Priestess," Mimir added, "which means I can perceive spirits of the dead. So don't try anything against me either, okay?"

Exia had mentioned spirits earlier, so it was likely her powers were related to that, but Mimir already had measures in place to deal with it.

"Very well, I acknowledge your new power. What will you do now?" Exia asked cautiously.

"That's a good question. Becoming a Demon Lord myself doesn't sound so bad. None of you plan on doing it, right? So why don't I?"

"Don't be ridiculous! You could never take their place!"

"And whose place would that be?"

"Faisal VIII, who we intended to support," Mimir answered.

"Don't you think it makes more sense for me to be the Demon Lord instead of that pipsqueak? I'm practically invincible. It's only natural that it'd be me, wouldn't you say?"

"Oh, how wonderful! Even though you barely understand anything about your new abilities, you're still so full of yourself! What a rare talent!"

As Mimir said, Yoshimasa didn't truly understand the extent of his powers yet. But he did have a good enough impression of how they worked. There was no one who could fight it. There was no one who could resist him.

"There are some humans nearby," Exia warned. "Are they friends of yours?"

Yoshimasa turned towards where Exia was looking. The people he had created were standing around, doing nothing in particular, but he doubted she was referring to them. Looking closer, he could see a few people mounted on a horse beyond the crowd.

"So there are. Are they soldiers who survived? Doesn't look like it. What do you think we should do, Mimir?"

There was no way these strangers just happened to be in the area. They must have had some business with either the demons or the heroes.

"I don't think they're anyone I recognize. If they're in the way, why not get rid of them?"

“I guess you’re right. Sounds good for my first job as Demon Lord. I gotta make it clear that I’m no longer human, right?” He already felt nothing at the prospect of killing his fellow humans. In his mind, he had transcended humanity.

Yoshimasa thought to turn his newly created lifeforms against the strangers. And as he did so, his creations instantly leaped into motion. Everything he had given life to moved like they were his own hands and feet.

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“I-It’s a bunch of perverts!”

“I don’t think that’s the real issue right now.”

A huge number of people were heading towards Yogiri and Tomochika. The crowd was so large that it was almost beyond belief, completely covering the plateau. And every single individual within it was naked. The mixed group of men and women ran straight at them, paying no heed to their own nakedness.

The ground and air shook. As far as they could see, everything was covered in unclothed skin. Anyone caught up in that human wave would be crushed to death, given the energy with which they moved.

“With everything shaking, we can’t even enjoy the fact that they’re naked,” Yogiri complained. There was absolutely nothing enticing about the scene before them.

“Wait!” Mokomoko shouted as Tomochika began turning the horse around. “Are you planning on running away?!”

“There’s nothing we can do, right?!”

Just then, a sphere of light descended in front of them, striking the ground hard and disappearing, prompting an even stronger earthquake. The Invincible Battalion’s horse came to a stop once again. Under the circumstances, even the greatest of horses couldn’t be expected to run properly.

“It’s a sphere of pure life force!” Mokomoko explained. “Some guy named Yoshimasa is taking others’ lifespans and using them to create new people from the earth!”

The ground bulged upwards, and one after another, humans emerged from the soil. Countless more naked men and women appeared, blocking their

escape.

"We're surrounded!" Tomochika cried, starting to sound alarmed.

"No running away, then?" Yogiri sighed. "I guess there's nothing else we can do."

If they ran away, they wouldn't be able to save Mokomoko. On top of that, the mob clearly intended them harm.

"Die." With one word, the wave of people fell to the ground, motionless.

"Your power is absurd, you know that?"

"Now that the obstacles are out of our path, would you mind hurrying up?!" Mokomoko pressed.

Tomochika turned the horse back around and set off for the cliff once again. The horse made its own path through the bodies, weaving between and jumping over them as it saw fit. With no one left to stop them, they were able to reach their destination quickly.

"So, what's going on here?" Tomochika asked.

At their destination, only one person was still standing: the mage, Rimlette. Three others were lying on the ground. The first was the demon general Oryphes, who had been killed by Yoshimasa. The second must have been Exia, another of the demon generals. Yogiri had been told she was a young woman, but she appeared quite elderly. Yoshimasa must have taken as much of her life force as he could manage. She seemed to just barely be alive, but it was hard to say if she was conscious. The third was Yoshimasa himself, dead. High Priestess Mimir was alive, but she was on the ground, wailing over the former hero's body.

Forget the situation! Just help me! Mokomoko cried in desperation.

Yogiri looked over at her. He still couldn't see the Lord of Specters or whoever was restraining her. But from this close up, there was something he *could* do. He could make the assumption that something existed, and that it was holding on to Mokomoko. From there, he could kill that hypothetical being.

Honestly, I thought I was going to die, Mokomoko moaned as she floated over to Yogiri and Tomochika a moment later. Yogiri's plan had worked perfectly.

"You're already dead, though," he observed.

"Did you kill Yoshimasa?"

"Yeah. When I killed the crowd, he died too."

“But when you killed Tachibana, the bugs didn’t die, did they?” she asked, remembering their old classmate. Back then, Yogiri had only killed the offender directly, the one actually giving the instructions. This time it was different, however, as the crowd attacking them had been a significantly more unified entity. Yogiri had felt that Yoshimasa and the mob were one and the same.

“Wh-What?! What are you people?!” Rimlette shouted, clearly panicking.

“We’re just passing through,” he answered. They had planned to quickly be on their way, but he decided to say one more thing while he was at it. “I suggest you stop casually summoning people from other worlds. It’s kind of a huge pain for us.”

“You might end up with someone like Takatou, after all,” Tomochika added earnestly.

Chapter 5 — What Have We Been Doing This Whole Time?!

After saving Mokomoko, they set out for their original destination. On the horse were Enju, Yogiri, and Tomochika, sitting in that order, with Tomochika holding the reins from the back. Mokomoko had given up on controlling the robot and was now accompanying them in her usual spirit form. Maybe she was still regretting being caught unaware while her attention had been focused on the android.

"These people are really in the way, aren't they?" Tomochika commented idly.

The horse was weaving around the many fallen bodies. There were so many of them that the entire field looked flesh-colored.

Tomochika suddenly realized that she didn't consider the corpses to be anything more than obstacles. She had witnessed so many deaths that even seeing this many bodies just seemed to be a matter of course at this point.

"Wow, I really am the worst..."

Well, it's hard to say whether these people even had free will.

"I'm the one who killed them anyway," Yogiri noted. "I don't think it's something that should bother you."

"That's kind of the problem. I was just thinking it's concerning that I find you casually getting rid of all these people to be natural now."

"They were trying to kill us. Should I not have stopped them even in self-defense?"

Tomochika had no argument against that. Without Yogiri, she would have died long ago. She was well aware of that and had resolved herself to dealing with the consequences of it, but as late as the sentiment was, she was beginning to wonder if it really was acceptable to write the carnage off so easily.

"You're right, but...especially considering what happened just now, don't you feel like you're eliminating too many people?"

“I do have criteria for who I kill...”

“I don’t understand those criteria very well. There *are* people you wouldn’t kill, right?”

“Yeah. I think I’ve explained it before, but the first rule is that if I’m going to be killed if I don’t do anything, I kill them right away.”

Tomochika figured she was much the same in that regard. Even if she was just a student, as a practitioner of an ancient martial art, she’d had a reflexive, mechanical reaction to danger bred into her. The point that made her hesitate was when that reflex connected directly to ending a life.

“What if they don’t intend to *kill* you?”

“If they’re being violent or trying to rob us, or otherwise threatening us, I’ll kill them anyway. Those aren’t the kinds of things normal people try to do. Going out of my way to spare someone who’s willing to commit those types of crimes without a second thought could cause trouble in the future. Letting them go will just make them hold a grudge.”

“Uhh, okay, then what about Hanakawa? He was our enemy, but you let him go.”

“I guess you’re right. Maybe because we talked to him so much.”

“Well, that explanation suddenly went off the rails!”

Maybe Yogiri had just started to feel sympathy for Hanakawa. Normally, he wouldn’t have hesitated to kill someone who had appeared and attacked them out of the blue. It wasn’t all that different from dealing with a wild animal. But by talking with him, he couldn’t help but see the guy as more human. It wasn’t surprising that such a viewpoint made it difficult to take extreme measures.

“What about Mireiyu?” she asked next.

Mireiyu was a cat girl they had met in Quenza when they’d first come to this world. After showing them around town, she had led them into the hands of a group of criminals who had intended to kidnap them. Naturally, Yogiri had killed them all, but there had been a significant gap of time between when he’d used his power and when Mireiyu had actually died.

He said at the time that it was an experiment, Mokomoko whispered to her, *but it seemed like a meaningless one to me. Do you not think he was just being considerate of you? If you’d seen her die right in front of you, it might have been a shock.*

Now that the spirit mentioned it, that did sound reasonable. They had

gotten awfully close to Mireiyu that day. Seeing her die in spite of her betrayal might not have been an easy sight to watch.

"I think I see it," Yogiri announced. At some point, the plateau had begun to slope gently downwards. In the distance, they could make out a walled port city and the sea beyond it.

"Finally. It took us long enough."

"Are we just going to go straight in? Judging from our previous experiences, things tend to happen on our first visit to every city."

"Yeah, I'm not sure. We could send Mokomoko to look around...but she might just end up getting caught again."

Have you lost your faith in me? Just who do you think I am?

"Well, if we don't go, we'll never know, will we?"

They headed into the city.

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The pair had to pass through an inspection station to get in, but they managed to do so without incident. It seemed the locals weren't too concerned about anyone who wasn't blatantly suspicious.

Perhaps because it was a port town, the city was overflowing with energy and bustling crowds.

"All right, we're here, which is good, but now what?"

"We need to get a boat, but we should probably find a place to stay first," Yogiri suggested.

After asking around town for directions, they headed for the most luxurious hotel in the city.

"We should be able to ask some questions in there." Yogiri seemed to have absolute trust in hotel concierges.

As they headed for the entrance, they were brought to a stop by someone abruptly stepping into their way.

"At long last! At long last, I've found you! You two! Do you have any idea how much work you've made for me?!"

It was a woman with the dress and equipment of a soldier and a man who seemed to be her attendant. For a moment, Tomochika thought they were talking to someone else, but the woman was looking directly at them.

"I feel like I've seen you somewhere..." Yogiri said thoughtfully.

“Oh, yeah!” Tomochika clued in first. “Back in Quenza. You thought we were criminals!”

It was the captain of the city guard, Edelgart, and her aide, Jorge. They had led the group of guards that had apprehended them after Yogiri had killed Mireiyu and her thugs.

“But how did you get ahead of us?” Yogiri asked.

Their journey had been full of all sorts of trouble. The places they’d visited always seemed to take devastating amounts of damage, especially in regards to the transportation networks. If Edelgart had been following them, it was hard to imagine she could have gotten ahead at any point.

“Umm, Captain, I don’t think we actually need to show ourselves to them. Lady Lain’s orders were merely to follow them and to contact her once we found out where they were.”

“What?! What are you suggesting we do?!”

“Like I said, we should contact Lady Lain...”

“And while we’re doing that, what’s to stop them from running away?!”

“If you hadn’t approached them, I don’t expect they would have run away in the first place.”

“Well, it’s too late for that now! I won’t allow you to run!” Edelgart declared, pointing at Yogiri.

“Another irritating person in our way,” Tomochika sighed.

“We’re not planning on running anywhere. How did you get here before us?” Yogiri asked again.

“Ha! We flew here, of course!” the captain declared proudly.

“Wait, if flying is an option, what have we been doing this whole time?!” Tomochika wailed.

Of course, now that she thought about it, there were many ways to fly in this world. Hanakawa’s group had flown back to the bus after they’d first arrived, so there must have been some sort of magic that allowed it. There were large creatures like dragons which could fly on their own, and the airships used by the Sages as well.

“Oh, don’t feel too bad about it. The sky is the domain of the Sages. Normal people aren’t capable of traveling that way.”

A young man had appeared from behind Edelgart. He spoke casually, like he was good friends with them, but Yogiri had no memory of him. Tomochika didn’t appear to recognize him either.

“Who are you?” Yogiri asked.

“Does the name ‘Kouryu’ ring any bells?”

“You say that like everyone should know who you are, but I honestly have no idea.” Tomochika answered.

“Kouryu, huh? I feel like I’ve heard the name before, but...” The memory was so vague, Yogiri couldn’t place it.

“I see. In that case, just think of me as that mysterious young boy who always shows up when it’s profoundly significant.”

“We’ve never met someone like that. What made you think that sort of explanation would be useful?!” In spite of her confusion, Tomochika was as full of energy as ever.

Chapter 6 — Let's Start About a Hundred Million Years Ago

Not interested in continuing their conversation in the middle of the street, they moved their gathering to the hotel lobby. Tomochika sat beside Yogiri on one sofa, with Edelgart, Jorge, and the boy calling himself Kouryu sitting across from them.

"You're not going to suddenly betray us, right?" Tomochika asked, making no effort to hide her suspicion. Kouryu carried himself with a very aloof air, so it was hard to trust him.

"Who knows? Am I an enemy? A friend? I'd say that mystery is my selling point."

"This guy is definitely annoying..." It was nice that he wasn't acting like their enemy, but that didn't make dealing with him any less irritating.

Edelgart seemed thoroughly unhappy. "And why do we have to be so friendly with these criminals?! We should just arrest them and get it over with!"

"I thought you let us go back then," Yogiri said nonchalantly. "I don't even know why you're following us now." Although he had, in fact, been the one to kill the group of thugs back in Quenza, he had never admitted it to her.

"Please! Then why did Lady Lain instruct us to follow you? No doubt because you are indeed criminals!"

"Umm, Captain, we don't truly have proof of any wrongdoing on their part."

"We have sent a pigeon to Lady Lain, but we will keep them here in the meantime! We couldn't say that we found them and just let them go! In that case, we couldn't even say that we'd found them to begin with!"

"Being stuck here would be a problem." Yogiri frowned, not hiding his frustration. "We're heading for Ent, an island country in the east."

"Captain Edelgart, this is a foreign land," Jorge cautioned. "We don't have the authority to detain them here."

“What?! Then what are we supposed to do?!”

The conversation continued to go in circles. Even though she felt that he was suspicious, Tomochika turned to Kouryu. She figured they had a better chance of getting through to him.

“Umm, I’d be grateful if you could give us a rough explanation of what this is all about.”

“Okay. It’s not that complicated, but I’m not sure where to start. Hmm, let’s start about a hundred million years ago.”

“You have to go back that far?!”

“Aren’t you interested in the story of my first love?”

“Why would you think we’d want to hear such a private story after just meeting you?!”

“How about you answer our questions with what’s relevant instead?” Yogiri offered.

“Okay, but whether you get a clear picture will depend on the questions you ask.”

“I’m guessing you’re just going to dodge the point anyway,” Tomochika grumbled.

“Why were you looking for us?”

Kouryu considered the question for a moment. “It’s a secret.”

“Oh, come on!” Tomochika couldn’t help but shout. That wasn’t the answer she had been expecting after he had acted like he was giving it serious thought.

“Okay, then can we go?” Yogiri asked, rising from his seat. “We don’t really have time to waste like this.”

There didn’t seem to be a reason to stay and speak with them. If these people weren’t going to explain themselves, there was little purpose in wasting more time.

“I guess having the mysterious boy’s objective remain a mystery is no good,” Kouryu remarked, his expression serious.

“Why does that surprise you?”

“Well, it’s not such a big deal. I just want you two to keep doing what you’re already doing, and I want to offer my help.”

“What do you mean?”

“I *love* it when Sages die. I’d really like to see it happen from close by. I want to offer you my help so I can see it with my own eyes.”

“Am I the only one bothered by the way he’s rhyming?” Tomochika commented.

“How do you want to help us?”

“I know a lot about this world. I’m sure I can be useful.”

“You know a lot, huh? So who are you, exactly?”

“You said ‘Kouryu,’ right? That’s your name?”

“It’s more like my race. When the new gods showed up and deposed the dragons that had been ruling the world, they branded us with that name as an insult. Hence, ‘Kouryu,’ meaning ‘fallen dragons.’”

“This is suddenly sounding like a pretty big deal! That’s crazy!”

“Yep. We’re stuck with that shame nowadays,” the boy replied with an exaggerated shrug.

“If Kouryu is the name of your race, what’s your personal name?” Yogiri asked.

“I’m the last one, the only Kouryu left. So you can just call me that; it won’t be an issue.”

Yogiri motioned to the soldier and her companion. “They said earlier that they flew here. Was that because of you?”

“Yeah. If I change into my dragon form, I can fly. I did that and brought them with me.”

“So could you take us to Ent, then?” If that were possible, they wouldn’t have to wait for a boat or waste their time with a slow sea voyage.

“I can fly you around, but not to there.”

“Why not?”

“The sky is the domain of the Sages. Just like on the ground, it’s divided up under the control of different ones. And the Sages don’t allow people to fly.”

“We’ve seen plenty of people flying around,” Tomochika commented.

“That was just for short distances, though. If you try to fly long-distance, you’ll definitely catch their attention.”

“But Edelgart and Jorge flew here, didn’t they?”

“Yeah. But there’s no Sage currently controlling this area. You killed them already.”

“I see. So basically, you’re weaker than they are,” Yogiri concluded.

“I don’t really like to admit it, but since I’m a fallen god, you’ve already guessed as much.”

“If you were stronger than the Sages, I’d have been grateful if you could have beaten them for us,” Yogiri muttered. If he used his own ability to kill them, the Philosopher’s Stones in their bodies would lose their power. For that reason, he had to slowly chip away at them instead—a process that was more trouble than he cared to go through.

“Wha—?! The pigeon is back! But there’s no sign of the message having been read. What’s going on?”

While Tomochika and Yogiri had been talking with Kouryu, Edelgart and Jorge had continued arguing with each other. At some point, they had been interrupted by the arrival of a bird.

“Uh, it’s just a pigeon, right? How can you tell if the note was read?”

“With these magical carrier pigeons, we can send messages across long distances. When it gets to the designated location and plays the message, it’s marked as having been read, obviously.”

“Okay, that’s just bizarre.”

Tomochika had known that in this world, magical carrier pigeons were used for long-distance communication, but she had figured that meant people tied written letters to birds that flew quickly from place to place. She didn’t realize the animals were capable of replaying a voice recording or keeping track of whether the message had been read.

“That is strange... Barring extreme circumstances, there is no reason the message would fail to reach her.”

“Well, that’s obvious. Lain is dead, after all,” Kouryu bluntly informed the confused Edelgart.

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“What?! Lady Lain can’t be dead! I’ve seen her power for myself! Even when her entire body was incinerated, she instantly regenerated!”

“On that note, the city where you guys live was also destroyed,” the mysterious boy added.

“Impossible!” the captain cried, jumping to her feet in anger.

“Don’t take my word for it. Send a message to someone you trust, and get them to tell you what happened.”

Edelgart and Jorge stepped away for a moment, no doubt to confirm Kouryu’s words.

“Hold on a second!” Tomochika spoke up next. “In that case, the other cities...”

Now that it had been brought up, it was a disheartening thought. The cities were kept safe by the protection of the Sages. Even the trains running between the inhabited areas needed a barrier to shield them. That was just how dangerous this world was. When the Sages disappeared, the people living in their protected regions were left in danger.

“Are you telling me you killed the Sages without even knowing that?” Kouryu asked.

Tomochika looked at Yogiri, but he was totally calm. She hadn’t realized it herself until then, but it must have been something he had already taken into account.

“If it makes you feel any better, Hanabusa is still okay. The Sage Alice has taken up the role of defending it. The capital of Manii was destroyed, but the Divine King and the Swordmaster are still alive, so I’m sure they’ll manage. And the City of the War God has plenty of fighting strength, so they’ll probably last for a while.”

Even hearing that didn’t offer her much consolation.

“That’s no reason to give up on collecting Philosopher’s Stones,” Yogiri said. “Or can you suggest another way for us to get home?” His primary objective was to return to Earth. He wouldn’t be deterred from that goal, regardless of the harm it might cause this world.

“Oh, I only wanted to ask if you were okay with all of that, but maybe I shouldn’t have brought it up. I do want you to keep killing Sages, after all,” the boy admitted.

“You think out loud too much,” answered Yogiri.

“He’s trying too hard to be mysterious.”

“Anyway. I know all sorts of things, including other ways you can get home, so will you let me come with you?”

“I assume you’re not willing to tell us now?”

“Of course I’ll give you something, but if I tell you everything up front, you won’t need me, will you?”

“Fine,” Yogiri agreed. “I have no plans to be friends, but if you want to follow us, you can do what you like.”

Tomochika had no objections either.

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Chapter 7 — These People Just Forced Me to Come Along! I Have Nothing to Do with Them!

Ragna's head hit the floor. His body fell, spraying blood all around. And the guy who looked like nothing more than a thug had called himself a Sage.

For Hanakawa's group, it was hard to believe what was happening in front of them, but the adventurer's guild continued operating as usual. In short, this was a regular occurrence for them.

What shall I do now? Hanakawa moaned internally.

Shigehito Mitadera, Akinobu Marufuji, and Rei Kushima stood frozen in place. They had yet to grasp the situation in front of them. So the first to move was Hanakawa.

In an instant, he was on his hands and knees. It was an easy choice between siding with his classmates or the Sage. There was no way he *wouldn't* choose the Sage. There was no way Sage candidates could beat the real deal. With Shigehito's powers as a Master Oracle, it was possible they might have found a way to win given enough time beforehand, but coming across a Sage when they hadn't made any preparations for it made that impossible. They still didn't have the World Sword Omega Blade, which they needed to defeat him.

The reason Hanakawa had been able to act so much faster than the others was due to his experience in dealing with Sages. Fear of these beings had taken root deep in his mind. He couldn't disobey them. Before they could learn to hate him enough to kill him, he needed them to feel like he was too pathetic to be worth their time. In order to accomplish that, he immediately prostrated himself on the floor. That was the most effective way to establish that he had no hostile intentions.

It was a truly smooth, skillful motion. Of course, there was always the possibility that it wouldn't accomplish anything. Depending on the

personality of his opponent, making a desperate attack might have been a better choice. There were those who would despise him for choosing such an unmanly method of trying to resolve the situation without a fight. But Yoshifumi didn't seem like the warrior type. Against someone dressed like a common street thug, making himself look pathetic and begging for forgiveness seemed like the right play.

"These people just forced me to come along! I have nothing to do with them! In a sense, I am, in fact, their victim! I have no intention of opposing the Sages! In truth, Lord Sage, these three have been plotting to kill you! They are truly wicked people!"

"Huh? You kiddin' me?" The Sage, who had already sat back down, looked at Hanakawa with surprise. He hadn't instantly killed him, so for now Hanakawa's plan seemed to be working.

"You came here to kill me? But judging from your faces, you didn't think I'd be here, did you?" Yoshifumi continued with a smirk. "Man, your luck must be awful. I just came here to kill time by squashing some newbies."

"Hanakawa, you bastard..."

He could hear Shigehito's furious voice behind him, but Hanakawa didn't so much as raise his head.

"I figured those prophecies were a bit too vague," Akinobu sighed.

As if responding to his words, the floor began to writhe, prompting a scream from Hanakawa. "I feel like I've seen this happen before!"

The floor beneath his hands had turned into dark red meat. The building had become a living thing. It was a similar phenomenon to what had happened on the bottom level of the Underworld. At that time, the ground had been fused with and taken over by the body of the Dark God, but this time it seemed to be a result of Akinobu's power.

The Creator. The power to turn anything he touched into a living thing and control it. He had once turned an entire fortress into a giant, so transforming a single bar was no problem for him.

"If the Sage is here, that makes it more convenient," Akinobu continued. "I just need to devour you where you sit!"

Uneven teeth appeared from above and below, an enormous tongue began to writhe, and then a dark cave appeared. They suddenly found themselves inside a monster's mouth.

This is one of those creatures that will kill anyone once they are inside it!

The patrons of the bar began to scream, panicking at the sudden change in their environment. But Hanakawa didn't move. He chose to stay motionless. Or rather, such a decision might have made him look better, but in truth he had no idea what to do, so he just kneeled there, frozen.

Well, if I stay like this, he might think I'm completely unmoved by the situation, which will improve his opinion of me, right?

While hoping that things would somehow work out for him, he felt the soft ground underneath him abruptly solidify. The dark red meat of the floor had turned gray. It had originally been a wooden floor, so it hadn't exactly gone back to normal, but it had at least turned to stone.

"I suppose that will do it." It seemed like Yoshifumi had done something, but from his tone, it was almost as if he didn't quite know what he had done.

"Yoshifumi, they ran away."

"What now? Are you going to let them go?"

"What are you, stupid?" he snapped back at his companions. "The Creator is one thing, but it'll be a pain in the ass if I let the Master Oracle or the Femme Fatale get away."

"Why? Sages can just nullify the Gifts of anyone who received their own from your kind, can't they?"

"You think I got weird skills like that?"

"No way... Are you actually as stupid as you look?"

"You ever seen me give the Gift to anyone?"

"Oh, now that you mention it, I haven't. I thought you were just being stingy, but are you just not able to do it?"

"It's not that I can't. It just doesn't suit me."

"Whaaat? What a lame excuse! So if you're not going to let them go, what *are* you going to do?"

"Rena, go get rid of them."

"Okaaay." The woman named Rena left, and the room went quiet.

Hanakawa lifted his face. The teeth and twisted walls and floor were just as they had been before, except that they were now made of stone.

"Petrification, I suppose?"

"Looks like it."

Hanakawa jumped, not having expected an answer. "I-I mean, as expected of a Sage! You dealt with Sir Akinobu's Creator skill so deftly!"

"You're a real coward, aren't you? I like that. I love it when the small fry

act all scared of me."

"Ha ha, I am ecstatic to hear that," Hanakawa said, dropping his chin back to the floor. He would continue to deprecate himself for as long as it took. He decided this was the only way out for him now.

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Chapter 8 — I Like to Play Around a Bit

After the bar was transformed into a living creature, Shigehito and the others immediately fled. There was no way for the newly made monster to recognize what was actually in its mouth, so it was impossible to have it attack only their enemies. They had no intention of saving Hanakawa either. Not because he had betrayed them, but because they had never cared about him in the first place.

Be careful, huh? Shigehito thought. That's what the Book of Prophecy said. It had cautioned them, but how were they supposed to interpret such a vague warning?

"Hey, why are we running away? We have no way to find the Sage later, right? Why not just fight him now?" Akinobu didn't put much trust in the prophecy. Unlike Shigehito and Rei, he had a skill that could be used in combat. With a firm grasp of what he was capable of, he was confident in his ability to fight a Sage.

But Shigehito, in turn, had no faith in Akinobu's powers. In the end, they were merely abilities granted to them by the Sages.

"They can neutralize the Gift in anyone with a position lower than their own! That's why we've been searching for a weapon that has no relation to the Sages!"

They needed to gain enough strength to fight their superiors without relying on the Gift, and Shigehito's prophecy was the only thing that could do that. During an actual confrontation, the Sages could nullify his ability to summon the Book of Prophecy, but as long as he read it while they weren't around, it should serve him well enough. The prophecies were simply information. No one could nullify what he already knew.

Shigehito believed that he was the only candidate who was capable of killing the Sages. That was why they had recruited Ragna, who had no connection to the Sages, and why they had been trying to obtain a special weapon for him.

"But my power worked just fine, didn't it?" Akinobu challenged him. "If

he can nullify it, why didn't he?"

Shigehito paused. Was it because Yoshifumi was too strong to bother with them? Or maybe he had just underestimated their skills? He didn't know, but he wasn't conceited enough to think it meant they could win.

"Either way, we can't fight him without making any preparations! Even you need time to gather allies, right?!"

Akinobu's ability was powerful, but he couldn't attack their enemies directly with it. He had to use his power of Creation to produce allies that could attack on his behalf.

"I'm already working on it."

"What?" As they ran, Shigehito looked back. The cityscape was transforming. Not just the bar—all the buildings around them were morphing into enormous beasts. "It's that easy for you?!"

"As long as I can picture it, I just need to touch it for a second. But creating something great does take a bit of time."

Akinobu must have been using his power on everything he touched while they ran. Even if his creations weren't capable of defeating Yoshifumi, their presence should have been enough to buy them some time. But that hope was immediately squashed when Akinobu suddenly fell forward as if he had tripped.

"Hey!"

"What are you, stupid?!" Rei shouted.

Shigehito continued to run. He was in no position to stop and help his classmate. He had to prioritize his own escape. But ultimately, he and Rei ended up stopping anyway.

A woman had appeared in front of them. Her revealing outfit showed a sickly looking body, accented by dark circles under her eyes. He couldn't ignore her; not when she was holding Akinobu's head in her hand.

A number of thoughts sprang into his mind all at once. Akinobu was dead. Who was she? How did she get ahead of them? Why did she target the Creator first? Why did she *only* target him? Shouldn't she have been able to kill all three of them at once easily enough? Or did she have a reason for keeping him and Rei alive? Or was there a limit to her ability—

"Umm, it looks like you're overthinking it, so I'll just go ahead and say there wasn't any particular reason I killed him first."

Shigehito went stiff. Had she read his mind?

“No, no. That just seemed to be what you were thinking. I guess you could say because he was strong, I figured it would be a pain if I let him continue, so I killed him first.”

She must have meant that him creating additional creatures would have been a nuisance. But the area had already fallen into chaos. Even with Akinobu’s death, the giant creatures he had made hadn’t returned to normal. They were now free, rampaging through the city.

“You are?”

“The evil empire’s leadership has all sorts of people. There are some loyal hard workers who will do exactly what they are ordered to and then head back immediately, but I like to play around a bit.”

Although indirect, it was an answer of sorts. Yoshifumi was the emperor, so that made her his subordinate.

“Don’t think I’m like Akinobu,” Shigehito warned, arming himself. Solid armor suddenly wrapped around his body, and numerous amulets and rings appeared on him. A pair of swords similarly appeared in his hands along with a variety of other weapons floating in the air around him. These were all items he had obtained using his Book of Prophecy without any of his friends knowing.

Akinobu had possessed a powerful skill, so he had made no effort to strengthen himself personally. But Shigehito was different. In order to grow in the most efficient way possible, he had gathered numerous powerful artifacts. In his current state, he felt that he was on the same level as any hero.

Then the woman planted her foot deep in his stomach. The kick penetrated his numerous magical defenses, punched straight through his rare metal armor, and thoroughly destroyed the organs underneath.

Sent flying by the impact, Shigehito struck a building behind him, losing all sense of where he was. He was barely alive. One of the pieces of his equipment gave him a regenerative ability, although he wasn’t sure which one it was.

“You’ve got some pretty good stuff, but that doesn’t mean much when the user is a novice,” the woman commented. “It doesn’t matter what your level is when your base stats are shabby. You have to build up those fundamentals first.”

Shigehito hadn’t seen her attack coming. He possessed artifacts that assisted in perceiving his enemy’s movements and enhanced his reaction

speed in response to potential danger, but they had all been useless against her.

"Oh? I'm surprised," the woman continued. "I didn't expect the Femme Fatale power to work on me. I'm not even into girls."

As Shigehito accepted his impending death, the woman turned to Rei. From his perspective, their enemy seemed totally vulnerable at the moment, but he knew better than to trust his novice instincts. He had no desire to move.

"But I can't let you control me that way. All right, I'll just make you into a pet, then."

As Rei's level increased, her physical abilities improved, but she had no skills that were useful for fighting. Against an amateur, she might have stood a chance, but she was totally powerless in the face of this monster. However, her ability to charm the opposite sex worked to a lesser degree on women as well, and it had managed to suppress her opponent's desire to kill her.

The woman took off with Rei, who was powerless to disobey her. Overwhelmed by crippling pain while his body slowly regenerated, Shigehito could do nothing but watch them go.

Chapter 9 — What Is This, a Shojo Manga?

Yoshifumi and his two female companions stepped out of the bar. Hanakawa stayed close behind them. They were the last ones out. After the building had started squirming and then turned to stone, the other customers had left immediately.

Naturally, there was just as much chaos going on outside. An enormous statue of a beast was sticking up from the ground—formerly the monster that the bar had briefly become. But the panic wasn't limited to that. Tigers, wolves, bears, boars, chickens, and all sorts of enormous animals were now rampaging around the city. There was no clear intent behind their actions. They simply seemed to be destroying whatever buildings were around them and eating anyone they could catch. It didn't seem like they were being controlled by anything in particular.

"Hey, things are lookin' like shit out here," Yoshifumi remarked in an amused tone as he surveyed the spectacle. This was supposed to be the capital of his own empire, but he didn't seem to mind the insanity much.

And now that he's not paying attention, it's time to fade away! This is it! I will finally attain my freedom and begin the construction of my otherworld harem!

But for that, Hanakawa would need to not only escape the immediate area but get away from the empire entirely. He would have to find a place far from the reach of the Sages where he would have the freedom to act as he wished.

He slowly started backing away. Rather than running in a panic, he would casually separate himself from the others.

"What is Rena even doing?" Yoshifumi complained. "It's like she just let them get away."

"Rena has her Intercept power, so she should have caught them," one of his groupies, a smaller girl, replied.

"What do we do now?" his other companion, a taller woman, asked.

“You know, I hate seeing things all messed up like this. I can’t take it.”

“Hmm, it looks like the damage is limited to the third layer’s southwest block. It hasn’t reached beyond that yet.”

The capital was enormous, split into a number of districts. They were currently in a block on the outer edge of the southwest of the city, which was enclosed by walls like every other block.

“Clean this area up, then.”

“Okay,” the smaller woman answered flippantly.

Hanakawa had a bad feeling. This woman was about to take action. Rather than just dealing with the creatures Akinobu had created, it sounded like she was about to do something far more indiscriminate. He had opened up some distance between himself and the group, but now he stepped back towards Yoshifumi. If anywhere in the area was going to be safe, it would be beside the Sage.

For now, the “Huh? Of course I’m with you. Is that a problem?” approach seems to be the best option!

Hanakawa inched towards Yoshifumi and the others. If he stood too close, they might find him annoying, so he stayed at the absolute outer limit of what could still be considered staying with them. If he interpreted Yoshifumi’s words earlier (about how he liked the cowardly small-fry types) as generously as possible, the Sage should be okay with having Hanakawa around.

He had made the right decision. For a few meters around Yoshifumi, nothing happened. But in a single instant, everything else disappeared. Aside from the walls enclosing the southwest block, absolutely everything was gone. The rampaging beasts, the people walking through the city, and the buildings lining the streets... It all disappeared without a sound, creating a huge, open field around them.

Oh no, oh no, oh no! What is happening here?! This is too strange!

It was all gone. Everything had vanished without a trace. The district must have had a few thousand people in it. How could they all have disappeared?

Hanakawa forced himself to stop thinking. There would be no pleasant conclusions gained by pursuing that line of thought.

“Hey! Could you not just reset things without warning like that?!”

Hanakawa turned around at the sound of the furious voice coming from behind him. Standing there was Rena, the woman who had gone in pursuit of

Shigehito and the others, with Rei Kushima beside her. They had been nowhere in sight just a few moments prior but were now standing there like it was perfectly natural.

"I figured someone with mid-level boss powers could easily cut us off or show up behind us, so it would be fine!"

Sounds like Mary from that urban legend, doesn't it? "I'm right behind you," or something like that.

"Who's Mary?"

Hanakawa was taken aback by Rena's question. He hadn't expected anyone to call attention to him just now. He had suddenly become the center of their focus.

"Speaking of which, what's with this guy?"

"He just sort of showed up, huh? Maybe I should have erased him too?"

"P-Please, spare my life!" Hanakawa immediately dropped to his hands and knees again. There was no reason for them to go out of their way to kill him. He would try to be as unassuming as possible, waiting for the moment they finally lost interest in him. He couldn't imagine them standing around in this empty space for long, so he was banking on the hope that they'd leave soon.

"I feel this guy is thinking if he takes a dump here, maybe we'll get disgusted by him and leave," Rena remarked, as if she could read his mind.

"How?!" He had, in fact, been clinging to the idea of using techniques that had been successful in the past.

"I just got that feeling."

"No, no, no, there's no way you could have such a pinpoint 'feeling'! You're reading my mind, aren't you?!"

"Damn, I guess you caught me. 'If my mind is being read, I need to be careful about what I'm thinking. Boobs.' I feel like that's what's on your mind right now."

"Dammit! I was thinking of all sorts of things I wanted a beautiful young woman to say, but she ignored them all! What do I do now?!"

"Why not try taking that dump?" the smaller woman suggested innocently.

"Would that help me? If so, I would gladly do it, as much as you wish!"

"No, I'd just erase you along with it."

"Of course!"

Ah, if my mind is being read, what should I do?! Why don't I start thinking about something totally unbearable to read? No, then I'd be so annoying, they would just kill me! Though thinking even this much might be enough for them to decide to kill me!

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Nothing. I must become one with nothing. Become as a stone, unresponsive to everything, so that they lose interest and leave.

As he thought that, Hanakawa pressed his face into the ground. They had seen through Shigehito's and the others' powers, so they must have had the Discernment skill. They should be well aware that Hanakawa had no particularly useful abilities. They should have known he posed no threat, so they could let him be without issue.

"You're funny," Yoshifumi commented.

"What is this, a shojo manga?" Hanakawa shrieked before realizing what he had just said. "M-My apologies!" He couldn't help his instinctive reaction to Yoshifumi's words.

"I've never seen a guy like you before. I'll keep you around as my clown. Come with me."

"Actually, someone such as myself is good for no more than producing fecal matter. I cannot offer anything of value to you, Lord Sage; rather, I imagine it would be a great inconvenience for you to have me around. If possible, rather than take me with you, I believe setting me free would be in the best interests of all involved... I mean, okay! I'll go with you! Please let me go with you!"

Yoshifumi watched his spiel with a grin, but the reactions of the others were quite different. His groupies turned gazes on Hanakawa that sent chills down his spine—a silent but obvious warning that they wouldn't allow him to disobey their leader's orders.

Hanakawa couldn't resist that pressure. For him, the only option available was to do as Yoshifumi said.

Chapter 10 — Interlude: Congratulations, You Have Awakened

Wrapped in heavy armor, Shigehito Mitadera lay amid the rubble. He hadn't moved since being kicked into the building by one of the Sage's underlings. His wounds had healed, but he had no desire to stand yet.

They had been wiped out. Never mind Yoshifumi; they hadn't even been able to defeat one of his lackeys. There was no point in standing back up. He could accomplish nothing. He hadn't expected to encounter the Sage so early, so he hadn't been able to make the necessary preparations. Besides, the moment Ragna, the one they had brought along specifically to stand against the Sages, had been killed, his plans became all for naught. Perhaps he could have come up with a new approach, but it wasn't easy to shift mindsets like that.

As he lay there, staring dumbly into space, he began to wonder why he was alive at all. That woman had come to kill them, so there was no reason for her to have spared him. Her power had been overwhelming, and killing him would have been easy.

"What, did you save me or something?"

It wasn't that the three of them had trusted each other. They'd been using each other for their own purposes. There was no reason for Rei to have saved him. But her having done so was the only possibility he could think of. Using her Charm ability, she had stopped that woman from finishing him off.

"Dammit...what do you actually think I can do?" The moment he realized it, he couldn't help but wonder. Rei was alive, at the Sage's side. If her Charm skill was working, she should be fine for a while.

Shigehito felt a small amount of his energy returning. While he didn't feel like doing anything for himself anymore, he thought he should at least save Rei. It wasn't like he was going to do so at any cost, but at least it gave him a course of action.

So, how could he help her? The amount of equipment he had gathered

was clearly insufficient to take on the Sages or the empire. What could he do all on his own?

Shigehito summoned his Book of Prophecy. He didn't much feel like using it at this point, but he was completely helpless without it. Lying on the ground, he extended a hand towards the sky. Just by willing it, he could summon the book to him.

But it didn't appear. He had done the same thing as always, yet this time nothing had happened.

"What... Why?! Appear! This is my power! My one pathetic power that can do nothing more than call up a book! If I don't even have that, what the hell can I do?!"

Of course, as someone with the Gift, he was far stronger than any ordinary person. By defeating monsters, his level would increase, improving his stats. But anyone who had the Gift was capable of doing that. There was no way it would be enough to defeat the Sage or his subordinates. It wouldn't be enough to save Rei.

"Dammit! All you can do is make garbage writing that can be interpreted in a thousand ways!" he yelled at the absent book. "You have no right to be so full of yourself! Appear! Get out here! Please!"

"That's not a nice way of saying it. It's true it can be a bit vague, though. I guess I'll have to accept that."

Hearing a voice, Shigehito turned towards the speaker. A girl was standing there, looking down at him from inside a dress that was so oversized she seemed to be buried under it as much as wearing it.

"Who are you?"

"What do you mean, who am I? You're the one who's been so desperate to call me out, right?"

Despite her condescending words, Shigehito remained at a loss.

"Oh? Clearly, you don't understand. I am that Book of Prophecy full of 'garbage writing that can be interpreted in a thousand ways' you were talking about just now."

"What?" Why was this girl calling herself the Book of Prophecy? And why was she speaking to him in the first place? Shigehito was incredibly confused.

"Congratulations. You have awakened. Thanks to that, I've managed to transcend my form as a flimsy magazine to be reborn in this form."

“What are you saying?”

“In order to escape the extreme danger nearby, your true abilities have been unleashed. I’m sure you have all sorts of doubts, but we don’t have time for that right now. Please get moving. You need to at least get beyond those walls.”

“What the hell are you talking about?! This doesn’t make any sense!”

“Seriously, give it up. Fine, then, I’ll just move you myself.”

The girl grabbed him where he lay and began pulling. She was far stronger than she appeared, easily dragging the heavily armored teen behind her.

“Oh, how I wish I could say something like, ‘I couldn’t care less about someone like you.’ However, you and I are one and the same. If you die, so do I.”

“What do you mean?”

“Even if I explain it, you won’t understand right now, will you? I won’t make you walk on your own, but at least stop resisting so that I can get you out of here.”

Shigehito gave up on thinking. He didn’t care anymore. Doing as he was told, he relaxed and let the girl drag him along the ground. Given the speed at which she was pulling him, she must have been using some sort of special technique. She hurried as fast as she could, pulling him behind her. Naturally, everyone they passed turned to watch, but she didn’t seem to care. As she drew close to their destination, she threw him forward. Somersaulting through the air, he flew over the wall.

“What the hell are you doing?!” He turned to complain but stopped short. There was nothing behind them. The city district he had just been pulled through had completely disappeared. “What...”

Shigehito froze at the sight. The streets, the people walking through them, the rampaging monsters... They had all disappeared, as if they had never been real in the first place. And the girl who had saved him was gone too. She had thrown him over the wall, but she herself hadn’t made it out. She must have known that would happen. That was why she had been in such a rush, why she had dragged him all that way.

“Why... Why would you save someone like me?”

“Like I already said, I was born from your power. As long as you’re alive, I’ll be fine.”

As Shigehito sank into self-loathing, he turned towards the source of the voice. The girl who should have been erased from existence was standing beside him, unharmed.

“What happened?!”

“I’d like to say, ‘Don’t make me keep repeating myself,’ but you are obviously severely lacking in intelligence. We’re not in danger at the moment... Why don’t we get out of here so you can calm down? I’ll explain things then.”

A significant portion of the city had just disappeared. It was understandable that the place was descending into chaos, so suspicion might fall on him if he were to hang around for too long.

The girl left Shigehito behind, walking away on her own. In spite of his confusion, he decided to do as she said for the time being. He discarded his equipment and followed her.

After passing through a number of districts, they reached a part of the city where the disappearance of the southwest block hadn’t made much of an impact, and the girl entered a cafe. Shigehito followed her in, joining her at a table.

“Let’s make things clear. Just because you don’t understand the situation doesn’t mean you can throw a tantrum like that. It’s annoying and embarrassing. Can you have a calm conversation now?”

“Okay...” As she said, they wouldn’t get anywhere if he kept getting stuck on every little detail. He decided to do his best to listen to what she had to say.

“I am the Book of Prophecy. If that’s too much for you to comprehend, we can simply say that your power has transformed. Up until now, your ability was to make a flimsy little book. Now it’s evolved to make this adorable, beautiful young girl. Got it?” The idea of a book transforming into a person was incredibly bizarre, but he decided to accept her explanation. “However, my nature as a Book of Prophecy hasn’t changed. I exist to express the will of the world.”

“So instead of being able to create a Book of Prophecy, I’m now creating a prophet?”

“I suppose that description will do. I still identify as a book, but there’s no reason to force that feeling on you.”

“You knew what was going to happen to the city because of the

prophecy?"

"That is correct. But it was your unconscious perception of the extreme impending danger that led to your awakening in the first place."

"So, now that you're a person, what's different?"

"The prophecies will be easier to understand. And you'll always have a cute girl tagging along with you."

"That's it?!"

"Being easier to understand is a big deal, isn't it? If you can interpret the prophecies better, you can be more careful about how you act."

"Yeah, well, it was definitely hard to understand before..."

"Prophecies require a particular skill in order to be interpreted. At their core, they are difficult to grasp the true meaning of. But from now on, I will be able to perform that interpretation for you and provide a thorough explanation of it."

"So, I can think of you as an ally, right?"

"Yes, although somewhat reluctantly. Any danger to you is a danger to me as well."

The Book of Prophecy had any number of traps in it. Though it didn't contain any lies, it wasn't exhaustive, and depending on how one interpreted it, one could draw multiple contradictory conclusions from the text. With a prophet on hand, however, he would have a partner to discuss things with and could confirm his theories with her. And if he was in danger, she would be too, so she would hardly intentionally misinterpret something out of spite.

"Then please tell me how to save Rei."

"So, that's the route you're going for. It would be a lot easier to run away."

"What would that accomplish?"

"Running away for now and increasing your strength would be easy. You might even be able to defeat the Sage that way. But there's no way of knowing how long Rei will last around him."

"Please, tell me how to save her as fast as possible!"

"Understood. Let's consider how that can be accomplished. First of all, let's get out of here. It's not like the Sage is watching the entire city at all times, but as long as we're here, there's always a chance we'll run into him again."

Shigehito shuddered. He had never thought that the Sage, the emperor

himself, would be lounging around town like a common thug. He wasn't optimistic enough to believe they wouldn't come across him by chance again.

"Okay. But how are we going to fight him?"

"At this point, fighting him is more or less impossible. But if our only objective is to save Rei, we can do that without a confrontation."

"That still sounds pretty difficult." He remembered how strong the Sage's underling had been. If Yoshifumi had multiple people like her around him, rescuing Rei wouldn't be easy.

"Yes, waltzing through the front door will never work. So we'll make use of Hanakawa."

"Hanakawa?! He's still alive?!" Shigehito finally remembered that Hanakawa existed. He had been with their group up until the incident in the bar.

"No matter which route we take, he'll pop up sooner or later, so he seems to be alive for now. Who knows what will happen later, though." The girl calling herself the Book of Prophecy stood up.

"By the way, what should I call you?" Shigehito asked as he made to follow her out. He was hesitant to refer to her as a book now that she had taken human form.

"Good question. How about Navi?"

And that's what they ended up going with.

ACT 2

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Chapter 11 — I Can’t Help but Feel like He’s Not Listening to Me at All!

The next morning, Tomochika and Yogiri headed to the port. Through the hotel concierge, they were able to arrange for passage on a boat fairly easily. An enormous cruise ship was docked there.

“I feel like I’ve seen something like this before,” Tomochika commented.

“Looks like the kind of ship to hit an iceberg and sink, doesn’t it?” Yogiri replied.

“I thought so too, but don’t say that out loud!” Tomochika had a bad feeling about this boat.

“It’s okay! Hou’s Crimson Blade could vaporize an iceberg in an instant!”

As Tomochika was looking up at the ship, a woman called out to them in a relaxed voice. Judging from what she said, she seemed to be speaking to Tomochika. Looking to her side, Tomochika found a tall woman standing there with a gentle smile on her face.

“Uhh, is that some sort of super technique or something?” she asked.

“Stop it, mom! Why are you butting into random strangers’ conversations?”

The woman had wrapped herself around a boy from behind. She was resting her rather ample chest on his head, which seemed to make him somewhat uncomfortable. If they had walked all the way there in that manner, they would have stood out considerably.

“Well, really, they were worried about icebergs. I wanted them to relax. Because you’re so strong!”

“I’m so sorry. My mother isn’t very good at reading the atmosphere.”

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“Whether it’s an iceberg or pirates, we’ll be fine! Just leave it to Hou of the Crimson Bond!”

Despite the woman’s confidence, her insistence only left Tomochika at a loss for words.

“Sorry, you’re probably totally confused,” the boy commented. “We belong to something like a small mercenary group. We’ve been hired to protect the ship.”

“Uh, you and your mother?”

“Yes...and my older and younger sisters as well.” The boy’s gaze became distant. It seemed he was suffering quite a bit.

“Are there actually pirates?” Yogiri asked.

“Yes. But they rarely attack ships of this size, and if for some reason they do, we’ll be there to protect you. Come on, let’s go! Everyone is waiting for us!” Urging his mother onward, he headed for the boat.

“So, there are pirates...” Tomochika’s sense of foreboding was getting worse and worse.

“There’s no way to get there except by boat. If you really don’t want to, we can try to find a different Sage,” Yogiri offered.

But the only Sage they had any concrete information on at the moment was Yoshifumi, who was in Ent. And the city of Hanabusa, which they had visited a while back, was now under the protection of a Sage named Alice, but that was quite far away, and there was no guarantee she was even there.

“Well, we’ve already come this far, right?”

“Ah, are you going to explain what will happen next? Turn around, you two.”

As Tomochika began to worry, another person called out to her. Turning, she found a Japanese boy standing there, looking at her. She had thought that maybe she’d been wrong, but he was in fact addressing her. She couldn’t help but feel a little put off. The way he was speaking made it sound like he was insulting her somehow.

“Oh? I thought you were like an NPC who existed just to explain things, but you seem a bit different. Judging from your looks, you might even be the heroine of the next event.”

“Um, who are you?”

As a young Japanese guy, her first thought was that he could be one of their classmates, but he didn’t look familiar to her. There were plenty of

Japanese people in this world. Even besides those being summoned by the Sages, there were apparently a number of locals who were drawing Japanese people to their world for other purposes, so his presence wasn't all that strange. However, the way he spoke to her was far too familiar, and the things he was saying were odd. Tomochika's expression was growing increasingly suspicious.

"I'm Yousuke Hiiragi. If you can talk, does that mean you're a potential party member? Oh, don't worry about it. I'm just talking to myself."

"You're Japanese, right? Were you transported here?"

"Oh? So that's the setting. What an odd NPC."

"I can't help but feel like he's not listening to me at all!" Tomochika recalled all the people she had met since coming to this world. These kinds of overconfident strangers rarely listened to a word she or her companions had to say.

"Do you think you're inside a video game or something?" Just as Tomochika was thinking they'd never get through to him, Yogiri spoke up.

"Hey, what's going on here? This is a pretty meta conversation. What a killjoy. You can't just have characters breaking the fourth wall like that. Seems like the kind of move a writer would make to show off how 'original' they are." Yousuke frowned. He wasn't happy with what Yogiri had said.

"Sorry about the bad writing, but do you mind talking for a bit?"

"What do you want? Won't there be some sort of event once I get on the boat and go out to sea? Well, maybe this is all to set a flag of some sort."

"If this is a game, how are you perceiving it? Are you holding a controller in front of a TV or something?"

"Don't be silly. What do you think VR is for?"

"And how are they making it work? I didn't think VR technology had developed enough to make a virtual world as realistic as this."

"I don't know the details, but I'm in some sort of capsule, I guess."

"What year do you think it is?"

The answer he gave lined up almost exactly with the date of their class trip, so it didn't seem like he was using any sort of futuristic technology.

"And can you log in and out at will?"

"That's enough of that. This is a Fantasy RPG world. I'm not here for boring events like this."

With that, Yousuke left them behind and headed for the boat. Several

people who seemed to be his companions followed him: three maids and an older individual. Maybe because of the conversation they had just had, Tomochika couldn't help but feel like they seemed to be dolls with no will of their own.

"What's with that guy?" she thought out loud.

"Inside a game, huh? That crossed my mind, but I figured if that's the case, there's nothing we can do about it, so I just ignored the possibility."

"What? You're kidding, right? There's no way a game could be this realistic."

"If you're asking if it's possible, it probably is."

"Really?!"

"For example, if you used a super powerful computer from the future, you could make a world that simulated the movements of each individual atom. But there's no way to prove it. It's like the Butterfly Dream or the theory that the world only came into existence five minutes ago."

"Well, I guess it is suspicious that the real world would have magic in it..."

"It's pointless to worry about whether it's all a game or not, but if it was, then maybe there'd be a way we could just log out to get back to our world."

Yogiri had been asleep when he was first transported, so it was possible he had been forced into a game at that point. But Tomochika had been fully aware from the moment they had moved from one world to the other. They had been on a bus when they'd suddenly appeared here, so it was unlikely they had been placed into some sort of VR game in the meantime.

That only works assuming you were put into the game at some point in the past, Mokomoko interjected. *If you were a character created within a game to begin with, there would be no way for you to log out.*

But Tomochika had plenty of experiences and memories from before she had appeared in this world. It was hard to believe they were all fabricated.

"That's right," Yogiri replied. "If we were created within the game, there would be no point in even thinking about it. So the only person we have to worry about is that guy."

"What do you mean?"

"If he thinks this is a game, there's a chance he might do something crazy."

"Oh! Yeah, I guess in a game where you can kill NPCs, you just start

doing it randomly sometimes, don't you?"

"So, you're that kind of person, huh?" Yogiri remarked. "I could never do that. I've never even been able to take on assassination quests in games before."

"What? How did this turn into me looking so heartless?!"

Tomochika felt his statement was somewhat unfair.

Chapter 12 — It’s Not Like We’ve Been Working!

“Hey, don’t you think we’re spoiling ourselves?”

After being shown to their room on the ship, Tomochika was overwhelmed by the special-class cabin—one class higher than first—that had been prepared for them. It was enormous, overflowing with a sort of luxury that no one, no matter how inexperienced they were, could fail to recognize. And although one such room was more than enough for them already, the cabin contained multiple rooms just like it.

For Tomochika, who was every bit the average person, it was luxurious enough to give her pause.

“It’s fine. We have money. If we’re too stingy, we might end up being miserable since we’re used to modern conveniences.”

Yogiri seemed unmoved by the splendor of the room. Enju had no particular emotion on her face, but that was only because Mokomoko wasn’t making a point to alter the robot’s expression, so it was hard to tell what the ghost was thinking. She was now moving through Enju as if possessing her. Controlling her from a distance left Mokomoko vulnerable, but acting through the android in this way made moving around feel more natural for her.

“Yeah, but are you sure we can afford it? I feel like we’ve spent a lot of money already.”

“We’ve made more than we’ve spent. It’s fine.”

“How?! It’s not like we’ve been working!”

“Our investments have been doing really well ever since we left our money with that concierge.”

“Oh, you did mention that. But how do *you* know how it’s going?”

“Every once in a while, a pigeon comes by to give me a report.”

The primary method of long-distance communication in this world was carrier pigeon. There were a number of ways to send messages across great

distances, but the magical pigeons could be reliably used anywhere, so they were fairly popular.

"All right, but even if we're making money through her, how do we actually get it?" Tomochika asked.

"I can send instructions through the birds too. They can encrypt the messages they carry, so I can use them to withdraw cash from the bank."

"These pigeons can do everything!" Tomochika wasn't familiar with the financial structure of this world, but apparently it was being carried on the backs of these carrier pigeons.

"Well, it was all Hanakawa's money to start with, so I guess we should be grateful to him."

"I feel like it's a bit late for that..."

The two finally made their way through the entrance and into the room itself. The first chamber they entered was the living room. Putting down their luggage, they sat down on the sofa.

"If nothing goes wrong, we'll be there in about a week," Yogiri said.

"Yeah, if nothing goes wrong."

"I'm sure if something happens, the boy will deal with it," Mokomoko interjected, speaking through the android.

"I'm not invincible. And being on a boat makes things difficult."

"Oh, really?" Tomochika gave Yogiri a skeptical look. After all this time, it was hard to believe him when he said that.

"If there's some trouble with the boat that makes it suddenly sink, there's nothing I'll be able to do about it."

"Wait, really?! What happened to your killing intent forecast?"

"Environmental danger that doesn't specifically target me is kind of hard to recognize." After all, Yogiri had been transported to this world and later been caught up in the collapse of a cliff in the Underworld. It wasn't like he could avoid any and all danger.

"Then what are we doing taking a relaxing boat cruise?"

"Worst case, we could always use Furemaru to build our own boat," Mokomoko said. "I don't believe it is a matter that merits concern."

"Huh? You mean that thing we got from the robot?" Tomochika asked. "I didn't know it had a name."

The mysterious substance they had acquired from the Aggressor was usually disguised as part of her clothing. Its form could be controlled at will,

so it could become a weapon, armor, or even wings. It was an incredibly useful tool.

"Indeed. It would be inconvenient for it to remain unnamed, and calling it 'the thing we got from the robot' seems disrespectful."

"So, does that name have a history or something?"

Names ending in "maru" were often given to Japanese swords. Tomochika wondered if the name Mokomoko had chosen held any special significance, since she was from the Heian era.

"It's short for 'flexible material.'"

"So, no meaning at all."

"Let's just hope nothing goes wrong with the boat," Yogiri said, standing up and heading for the bedroom.

"It's only noon. Are you really going to sleep now?"

"There's nothing else to do. What about you?"

"Hmm. Maybe I'll go have a look around."

As luxurious as their cabin was, they'd be bored if they locked themselves inside. Tomochika thought it would be a good idea to get to know the ship they would be spending the next week on.

Before he could leave the room, Mokomoko tossed something to Yogiri.

"What's this?"

"It is a piece of Furemaru. If something happens, I will contact you. It should be faster than using a cell phone."

"Got it. Let me know if someone dangerous shows up."

"If you could break off pieces of that stuff, why did you wait until now to do it?" Tomochika asked.

"Dividing up Furemaru is a rather complex process. I was only able to accomplish it recently."

Up until then, they could harden the substance and use it as a throwing weapon, but any parts that split off couldn't be controlled. It seemed the guardian spirit had resolved that issue somehow.

"Wait, is he already asleep?!"

While Tomochika had been speaking to Mokomoko, Yogiri had already begun snoring.

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At the end of the deck were a number of lifeboats. They seemed sturdy enough to be reliable if the worst were to happen, but there were surprisingly few.

“I don’t think everyone on board will fit.”

“As I recall, the insufficient number of lifeboats was also a problem on that Earth ship that hit an iceberg.”

“Special-class guests like you have no need to worry. Everyone in your class and first class will fit,” one of the staff noted as they walked by.

People staying in the special cabin were treated as VIPs, so it wasn’t strange that the employees already knew their faces.

“Oh. So the poor are left to die, huh?”

“Yet even the second-class tickets were rather expensive,” Mokomoko commented.

Tomochika and the spirit wandered around the ship. Mokomoko remained in her state of Enju possession since it made conversing much easier. Even if Tomochika was discreet, speaking with someone who no one else could see would seem unnatural to those around her, so they had decided this way would be best.

“There’s plenty to do. A week on this boat won’t be a problem.”

The vessel was equipped with a gym, tennis court, pool, public bath, casino, high-class restaurant, and concert hall. There were plenty of ways for them to spend their time on board.

“So, what do you think?” Mokomoko asked. “Shall we make the journey after all?” They weren’t scheduled to depart until nightfall, so they still had time to cancel the trip if they wanted to.

“Yeah, well... I can’t help but get a bad feeling about this. I don’t think there will be any icebergs, though.” Icebergs only appeared in the far northern oceans, so it was highly unlikely they’d come across one.

“Some suspicious individuals will be on board as well, but if anything happens, the boy will take care of it.”

“My question is, should we be trying so hard to defeat the Sages and get their Philosopher’s Stones? I’ve been wondering about that recently.”

“At the moment, it is the most promising method of returning home, is it not?”

“Yeah, but it’s causing a lot of problems for the people of this world. Do we really need to go that far to help ourselves? I’m not sure.”

If the option was there, of course she absolutely wanted to go home. But the cost to do so was proving to be enormous at this point. As the Sages died, the world's ability to protect itself from outside threats diminished. It wouldn't be long before the Sages were unable to protect their citizens from the Aggressors, which would put the entire world on the brink of destruction.

The Sages weren't good people by any means. They didn't treat their subjects as humans, and they killed many of them without a second thought. But that was better than the damage that would be caused by the Aggressors. It was a necessary evil. No matter how bad the Sages were, the world needed them.

Yogiri was determined to return home, even if it meant destroying this world, but Tomochika wasn't. She felt that if the cost was that great, she would rather give up and stay here.

"Remember before, when Hanakawa called us a pair of psychopaths? I feel like it's wrong for us to just plow ahead, killing everything in our path." It would take a certain amount of resolve to live in this world, but Tomochika didn't feel it was worse than abandoning everyone else and being totally unfeeling.

"But returning home in and of itself presents no direct harm to this world. We don't necessarily need to kill the Sages to acquire Philosopher's Stones, and we may not need too many of them. On top of that, we might learn something from Kouryu regarding another way back."

"I can't imagine it going smoothly."

"Well, if you'd rather stay in this world, that's fine too."

"It is?!"

"I have persisted for the sake of protecting the Dannoura family and ensuring the prosperity of its descendants. That is why I am here to protect you. The location, the place where I perform my job, is entirely irrelevant. That said, I do believe returning home will make it easier for you to prosper."

"Well, even if I choose to live in this world, it's something I'll have to think about."

"I suspect you would want for little. Many people seem to come here from Japan, so you can generally communicate in Japanese. And depending on the location, you can live with all the modern conveniences of Earth."

"I know it's a bit late, but if Japanese culture is so widespread here, that must mean a lot of people are coming from back home, right?"

“I am unsure of why, but that does seem to be the case. Perhaps Japan itself has some special quality.”

“But, like...so what? It’s not like having Japanese people around means I’ll be able to live comfortably here.”

It wasn’t that she had given up entirely on going back home. But Tomochika had begun to think that staying in this world might be a viable option.

Chapter 13 — Congratulations! You've Been Chosen!

The young man who had introduced himself as Yousuke Hiiragi was actually a girl named Youko Hiiragi.

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Congratulations! You've been chosen! You have been selected to participate as a tester in the next-generation open-world RPG, End of World*!*

A suspicious email, looking like nothing more than spam, was what started it all. A random message from a developer she had never heard of. Normally, such a nuisance email would have been ignored, but Youko thought it might make for some good content.

She was unemployed. At the moment, she was surviving on her savings and unemployment insurance, but she still had notions of making a living as an author, blogger, or comic artist. So she thought that responding to such a scam email might actually provide some good content for her.

Searching the internet, she found that a considerable number of people had received the same email. Most ignored it, but a few had installed the client and were playing, so it appeared that, at the very least, it was indeed a real game.

Watching some gameplay footage showed it to be a typical open-world fantasy RPG. As far as she could tell, it was rather plain and uninteresting, but the selling point of open-world games was the freedom they afforded. Depending on her approach, if she made a video reviewing the game, she could gain some popularity.

With nothing better to do, she decided to try it out. Just to be safe, she used a spare PC she had lying around, isolated it from the rest of her home network, and installed the game, following the instructions in the email. It

wasn't an online game, but it was set up to pull resources from a remote server as needed, so an internet connection was required.

At first, she felt it was a pain to play. Everything about it seemed to be lacking in user comforts. First of all, the world was far too large. It was quite literally the size of Earth and built entirely to scale. If there was a city that housed a hundred thousand people, there would in fact be hundreds of thousands of NPCs, houses and places for them to work, sufficient farmland to provide them all with food, and the social infrastructure needed to keep a large city running.

Between the cities were extremely long roads or empty fields and forests where there was almost nothing going on at all. The player needed to manage annoying needs like hunger, sleep, and bathroom breaks as they traveled, and everything occurred in real time, unlike many similar games where, for example, one hour in real life might equal one day in the RPG.

Normally, open-world games also had options to teleport or fast travel, or ways to speed up in-game time, but this one had none of that. While it was certainly realistic, it was mostly just irritating to deal with.

Still, if asked whether the game was boring, her answer would have been "No." Reactions from the NPCs were incredibly varied. You could speak to them using the chat interface, and they would respond appropriately based on the situation and their own personalities. It seemed to be using some form of advanced AI, but she wouldn't have been surprised to find there was a live person on the other side typing back responses.

Based on this, one might get the impression that it was a painstakingly realistic world simulator, but there was more to it than just the realism. *End of World* was made for the amusement of its players. In contrast to the believable structure of the world, the players themselves were exceedingly fantastical. Player characters had levels, stats, and skills. With minimal effort, their levels would rapidly increase, they would gain skills based on the actions they took, and they would rapidly become superhuman.

Youko was soon completely absorbed. Going wild in such a realistically crafted world was thrilling. She enjoyed rampaging around as if to vent her own frustrations with life.

Eventually, she received another email.

Announcing End of World—VR Edition.

It was a notice informing her of a new version of the game for players

who had become deeply involved with it. The upgrade would require a significant amount of extra equipment, but it could all be rented from the developer.

Her initial suspicions long forgotten, Youko applied to be a tester of the VR version. In possession of new goggles and gloves to see and control the game with, she grew completely addicted. And just as she'd become fully acquainted with the VR version, she received another email.

Announcement of End of World *FIVR Test*.

FIVR was an acronym for Full Immersion Virtual Reality, a technology in which all of one's senses were integrated into the game, making it feel like the user had actually been transported there. This version was only available to a small number of the VR test players, and it came with a considerable amount of monetary compensation. The number of applicants they were accepting was extremely low, so Youko applied without hesitation.

The response came immediately, but she didn't think that was suspicious either. She figured she had just been lucky. Her decisive action in responding quickly had been rewarded.

As one might expect, an ordinary house couldn't accommodate the equipment required for FIVR technology, and as that technology was still in development, it wasn't something the company could easily lend to players. So Youko was invited to visit the developer's lab, where she gladly signed all sorts of contracts. She didn't know what they were all about, but she was worried that if she complained, she would lose her chance.

The testing phase was supposed to last for a few months. Never mind being unable to leave the facility, she wouldn't even be allowed to log out during that time. Life support functions would be provided, but she didn't know the details of how the technology worked. It seemed somewhat suspicious at this point, but she had heard similar stories of people being restrained for extended periods of time during research related to space travel.

Youko had no strong doubts, so she set about getting herself ready for the test. After quitting her previous job, she had holed up at home, so she wasn't close to many people, but if she was going to leave her house unattended for several months, there were some preparations she needed to make first.

Once she completed those, she returned to the lab, where they took her to the VR machine. It was a long, thin capsule, just large enough to hold an adult. She stripped off her clothes and lay down inside. The lid closed over

her, cutting off all light and sound.

And then she was suddenly unconscious.

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When Youko woke up, she was lying on a bed. She sat up and looked around. At first she thought it was an unfamiliar place, but she soon recognized it as a room in the mansion she had bought in *End of World*. She hadn't realized it at first because of the difference in resolution.

The goggles she'd been using for the VR version were high-end technology, but VR was still just a projected image. If one looked closely, it was easy enough to pick out the individual polygons and notice where the textures hadn't quite been applied correctly.

But the sight before her right now looked exactly like the real world.

She couldn't help but have her doubts. She felt it was far more realistic for someone to have replicated her mansion in real life than it was to develop such realistic FIVR technology. All they had to do was put her to sleep when she thought she was logging into the game, and then carry her over to a faithfully recreated set.

But those doubts were soon shoved away. After performing the command gesture she was used to using in the VR version, the system window appeared before her. Obviously, something like that couldn't happen in the real world, so she must have been inside the game.

As she was going through the menu, she noticed that her hands were strangely pale. Hurriedly checking her body, she realized what was wrong. The body was gorgeous, but it was that of a man.

"Oh, I get it."

Glancing at her status window, she realized that her game data from the VR version had been carried over. In short, she was playing as her male character, Yousuke Hiiragi.

She got out of bed and tried moving around. Her movements felt natural. Despite the gender swap, nothing much had changed. Looking in the mirror on the wall, a young man with looks so flawless they couldn't have existed anywhere outside of fiction stared back at her. She had spent hours perfecting that face in the character designer.

"Well, that's fine. I guess I just need to role-play as a guy, then."

She generally made her characters male in games where she had the choice, so while the change was a surprise, it wasn't an unwelcome one. Deciding to take it as a chance to have an experience that would normally be impossible, she embraced her new "life" as Yousuke.

Pulling herself together after the shock of that discovery, she continued to familiarize herself with the situation. The clothes she was wearing were those she had obtained in the VR version, and they had various effects built into them. There was no doubt that her save data had been ported over.

Next, she selected the Air Cutter spell from the system window. She was wondering how magic would work in this version, or if it would work at all, so she wanted to test it out. Pointing with her finger, she selected her target. As she did, a violent crash resounded as the bed was split in two.

"Oh, so I can break these now."

【TIP: Lock objects that you don't want to accidentally destroy.】

As if in response to her comment, a message window popped up in her vision. In the VR version, she couldn't break things like buildings or furniture, but in the FIVR version they were destructible. Since that could prove to be an inconvenience, it seemed there was a way to prevent it from happening.

"Master Yousuke! What is the matter?!"

In a panic, a number of women in maid uniforms burst through the door. They were Youko's servants. In keeping with the realism of the game, one person couldn't carry too much at a time, so Youko had hired a number of people to handle her miscellaneous tasks.

"Hmm...you don't look so great in real life, do you?"

She had originally chosen them for their good looks, but seeing them up close like this, she felt they weren't that attractive at all. They had acne and open pores, and their teeth were crooked. Youko suddenly grew curious about what else the lower visual quality of the previous versions had hidden from her.

"Is there no tutorial or anything?"

Since it was building on the VR edition, there was no need for a detailed explanation of how the system worked, but she needed to learn how to properly fight in this body sooner rather than later.

“Are there still any bandits nearby?” she added.

“Yes, they are still lurking in the area,” one of the maids responded.

The mansion she currently occupied was in the middle of the mountains and had originally been a bandit hideout. She had taken it over from them, but some of the former thugs had continued to hang around.

“Good. I’m going out. Clean up the bed and set up a new one. One of you, grab a weapon and come with me.”

She left the mansion and looked around. A compass display appeared in front of her eyes, showing the approximate position of nearby objects. Studying it, she could see a number of red human indicators. Red marked enemies. And if they were humanoids, they were likely bandits.

Youko set off on a casual walk through the woods. The time she had spent practicing ambushing people in order to raise her stealth skill paid off, allowing her to walk right up to the bandits without being noticed.

After giving orders to her maid, Youko readied her sword. It was an ordinary sword with no particular abilities, but that made it perfect for her test run. She swung it a few times. Just like in the VR version, the strike was enhanced according to her level of the Swordsmanship skill. As she randomly swung the blade around, the system recognized it as a command and executed an appropriate attack automatically.

Youko approached one bandit from behind, slashing his back. His upper body separated from the legs easily, falling to the ground. Blood sprayed and organs tumbled out. The smell of blood and viscera filled the air, and she immediately began to vomit.

Her maid ran to her side, worried. “Master Yousuke! What is the matter?!”

Youko had underestimated what it meant to kill a person.

Chapter 14 — I Tried Burning Down the Elven Forest

As acid burned her throat, Youko dropped to the ground. She felt no guilt at having killed a bandit; it was only an NPC in a game. They were nothing more than treasure boxes that dropped loot in her mind, but she couldn't help the physiological response, given how realistic the scene was. It hardly felt like a game at all.

With shouts and curses, the other bandits charged at her, but their swords and spears were harmless. The gap in their levels was so large that none of their attacks could overcome her defensive stats.

Even so, she sat there on the ground, trembling. The smell of blood, viscera, and vomit made her dizzy. She was frozen in fear at the rain of weapons falling on her and the twisted, drunk-on-violence faces of the men wielding them.

The maid at her side did nothing. She seemed concerned about the fact that her master was vomiting but not about the attacks that were coming her way. She was confident that her master wouldn't suffer so much as a scratch.

I'm done with this! I'm quitting!

As she opened the system menu to log out, Youko noticed a new message in the tip window.

【TIP: For those uncomfortable with grotesque imagery, try adjusting the violence filter.】

They must have had a filter to reduce the amount of blood and gore being displayed. Opening the appropriate menu, she immediately set it to maximum.

Blood disabled.
Injury display disabled.

Smell disabled.
Pain disabled.
Damage pop-up enabled.
Corpse disappearance enabled.
Cartoon shading enabled.
Flicker disabled.

All of the settings changed at once. In an instant, her vision was completely altered. Everything took on an animated look, with clearly defined lines and shadows. She no longer felt any pain, and each time she was struck by an attack, a bubble displaying “0” or “1” would pop up. She couldn’t smell anything anymore, and her discomfort began to abate.

Youko stood up. Even the bandits had lost their sense of realism now. They looked like generic video game enemies, not the least bit scary. She delivered a kick to one of them, destroying him in a single blow. Her opponent disappeared in a burst of glowing fog, and all that remained were the items he dropped.

“Yeah, this is a game, so looking like this is fine.”

Youko quickly recovered. With the intense, lifelike depictions of battle gone, she recognized once more that this was only a game. Finally realizing that their opponent was no ordinary human, the remaining bandits screamed as they began to run away.

“You think I’ll let you go?” Opening the targeting window, she selected the Ice Missile spell and aimed it at her three fleeing enemies. With the lock-on function, the projectiles could automatically pursue them within a set area, so she wouldn’t need to aim precisely.

Chunks of ice appeared in the air. They flew forward, deftly weaving through the trees to strike the heads of the three men. All of her targets promptly vanished in bursts of light. She noticed that the bandit she had killed first had also disappeared. All that remained was the equipment they had been carrying.

“They turned into light and disappeared... I thought something was strange about you today, Master, but were you just testing that out?”

“Huh? You can see all that?”

“Yes. A little while ago, the bodies and pools of blood suddenly vanished, but that was because you did something to them, didn’t you?”

Clearly, the violence filter modified more than just Youko's vision.

"Shouldn't a filter only affect my own view?"

Youko decided to test it out. Using the material search function, she entered "animal bones," and the compass displayed the distance to the closest one.

"There's an animal over there. Go kill it and bring it back," she ordered the maid.

The woman was strong enough to follow Youko around on her adventures, so something like a wild animal posed no challenge for her. After a short while, she returned, holding something in her hand, but it quickly vanished in a puff of white smoke.

The maid let out a startled yelp. "Huh? What happened?"

Looking down, Youko saw that a slab of meat had dropped to the ground by the other woman's feet. A small bone was lying there next to it as well.

"That was a rabbit?"

"Yes. Its entire body was here a second ago, but..."

It seemed that once the object entered Youko's field of view, it was transformed by the filter. And if she averted her gaze, it didn't transform back.

"I see." The environment had been crafted in such a realistic way, but it still seemed like the game elements were rather over the top. "I guess I'll have to modify the settings bit by bit. What should I do next?"

Aside from playing the game, the developer hadn't given her much in the way of instructions. The idea was to observe what effects the long-term use of the technology might have on the human body, so all they had asked of her was to play like she normally would.

It seemed like a wasted opportunity to simply laze around without a goal, though. Youko would be paid considerably for her help either way, but she couldn't be satisfied with doing nothing. She intended to upload the footage of her adventure to a video sharing site. It would be the first ever demo video of a FIVR game. There was no doubt that it would be popular. Everything she did was being recorded, and she had been given permission to release it to the public.

Playing a FIVR game of any kind would give her plenty of rare material, but leaving it at that would be boring. The viewers always demanded greater stimulation, and she would need to answer that demand. So she decided to do

all sorts of things that her future fans would enjoy.

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"Okay, take off your clothes," Youko ordered her maid.

"Huh?"

Just as she thought the maid was about to comply, the woman stopped to stare back blankly, leaving her at a bit of a loss. Maybe she had gone too far or there was some restriction on explicit content. But if that were the case, she was glad to have found out at the start.

"Oh, my apologies," the maid finally answered. "I was just a little surprised. I didn't think you had an interest in such things."

If she had been set up to carry on the role of the maid who had accompanied Youko through previous versions of the game, her confusion wasn't surprising. Youko had little interest in a maid of the same gender as herself.

"You don't have to if you don't want to."

"No! I will!"

Without further hesitation, the woman removed her clothing until she was naked. Due to the Cartoon Shading filter that was currently active, she didn't look especially lifelike, but it was enough to tell that everything had been designed accurately. Nothing one would expect from a woman's body was missing.

Be that as it may, this doesn't seem like the right direction to take.

It would make her video "adult only." It might be popular, but only in limited circles. Youko was interested in a much broader kind of popularity—one that would take the nation by storm.

"That's enough. Put your clothes back on."

"What?! What are you saying? Are we not going to begin an illicit relationship?"

"No? I was just wondering what your privates looked like."

"So it's some sort of neglect fetish, is it?"

After that, Youko decided to check out her own privates. They were there.

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Late at night, Youko headed for a small settlement close to her mansion. Thinking a larger group might be noticed, she brought only a single maid with her. Her Stealth level was quite high, so alone, it was highly unlikely she would be seen. But there was a lot she didn't know about this world, and the maid seemed like she would be useful. Youko worried that if she was alone, she would make mistakes regarding things that were supposed to be common sense in this world. She wanted the other woman's assistance to prevent that.

"Just to make sure, there are no guards or anything, right?"

"Correct. Not for a settlement of this size. But if you're concerned about that..."

"No, I don't plan on doing anything bad."

Youko chose a random house and walked over to it. It was a wooden building with only a single floor. Stepping up to the door, she pulled out a hairpin and inserted it into the keyhole. Her intent was to pick the lock.

Of course, Youko herself possessed no such skill. The ability to pick locks belonged to "Yousuke" alone.

Once she began the process, a small minigame began. Regardless of the form the lock itself took, if she could clear the minigame, it would open. Perhaps because it was a rather rundown house, the difficulty was fairly low, and she broke in rather quickly.

"Doesn't this count as doing something bad?" the maid asked.

"It's their fault it's so easy to open. If they really wanted to stop intruders, they would have a stronger lock."

This world was realistic to a fault. The locks should have been created to match that, but instead they could be opened merely by playing a minigame. Youko interpreted it as an invitation from the game to break in.

Opening the door quietly, she stepped inside. There was a single man there, lying on a bed.

"Okay, let's steal whatever we can. You help too."

"So, we're doing something bad after all," the maid replied with a sigh before doing as she was told.

From the contents of the chests and pots to what the sleeping man himself was wearing, there didn't seem to be any restrictions on what she could take. She could even strip off his clothes while he slept.

"This is so cruel," the maid remarked. "This poor man is going to be totally penniless."

“He’ll still have his house and furniture. Wait, can I take those too?”

Youko opened workshop mode. It was a feature designed for the management of buildings and settlements. Through it, she converted one of the chests to its base materials. In an instant, it had been transformed into a stack of wooden planks that she could move to her inventory.

“I see... This is interesting.”

She continued to reduce the man’s furniture to base parts. After collecting everything, all that remained in the house was Youko, her maid, and the sleeping man.

“I can’t help but feel bad for him, seeing him lying here in an empty house like this.”

“Oh, we’re not done yet.”

Youko went outside, ordering her maid to carry the man out with her. Then she disassembled the house itself. A large amount of wood and a small amount of metal appeared, which she took.

The man was now left with absolutely nothing.

“Incredible. That’s incredible, but what was the point of picking the lock if you could just do that?” the maid asked.

“You can’t disassemble a house while there’s anything inside of it, right?”

She tried to disassemble the house next door just in case, but nothing happened. As expected, the building had to be empty.

“How many homes are in this village?”

“I’d say about twenty. Wait, you don’t mean...”

“It wouldn’t be fair to leave just this one guy broke, would it?”

Cleaning out and disassembling twenty buildings would be a tremendous amount of effort, but that’s why it had value. Videos in this vein had merit because you were doing something that others wouldn’t ordinarily do, even if it was a pain to get it done.

By morning, there was nothing left in the village. As one would expect, the villagers awoke and immediately panicked. Their home had become an empty lot, and they were all lying naked on the ground. “Confused” couldn’t begin to describe how they felt. They didn’t even have the composure to consider what they should do next.

Youko smiled, watching them for a while from a distance before leaving. She didn’t care much about what the villagers did after that.

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Over time, Youko continued to do anything she could think of that would make good content for her streams. Following an NPC around and sowing chaos in his or her daily life; instigating monsters to attack a town and then stepping in as their savior; kidnapping young girls to force the men of their village to dig holes endlessly... She tried it all.

Most of it went well. Whether it was interesting or not, with Youko's abilities, she could accomplish almost anything she set out to do.

"Hmm. How does 'I tried burning down the Elven Forest' sound for a video?"

At present, Youko was in her mansion, thinking of what content to work on next.

"What's an 'elf'?" the maid at her side asked.

"Oh, are there no elves here? What races are there besides humans?"

There had been no choice of race in the character designer, so she didn't have much knowledge of what types of beings existed in the game.

"Besides humans, there are the beastkin who bear characteristics of various animals. Then there are the demons, who excel at magic, and the half-demons, who have large reserves of magical energy but aren't particularly skilled at using it. There are also the childkin, who look like children even as mature adults. That's about it. Of course, I only know of the races on this continent."

Beastkin could be found in any city, so their standing seemed little different than that of humans. They didn't have any dedicated settlements that she could find.

Demons lived in demonic kingdoms under the rule of a Demon Lord, so interfering with them would likely mean declaring war on the entire nation. She didn't mind the idea, but it seemed like a much more "main story" route. If she was going to go down that road, it should be at the end.

Half-demons secluded themselves in settlements deep in the wilderness, so they sounded perfect, but they were so often preyed upon that they took great pains to remain hidden, and finding them was difficult.

So Youko decided to attack the childkin.

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“Oh, this is no good.”

The settlement was ablaze. The cute little buildings, packed snugly together like they’d been pulled right out of a fairy tale, were all on fire.

A little girl fleeing a burning building was struck down by Youko’s maid, disappearing in a puff of light. Only her clothes remained. Another maid dragged more children out from where they were hiding behind a barrel and killed them. These kinds of events were happening all over the village, leaving a mess of children’s clothes everywhere.

“This won’t do well overseas, will it?” Even if the violence filter erased their bodies, it didn’t change the fact that it looked like they were killing children. She had thought the idea of “wiping out the childkin” was an entertaining one, but now that she’d done it, it didn’t seem like it would make for very good shared content. If she were to publish a video like this, she would no doubt face vicious criticism.

“Okay, stop for now! Come back!” she called out in a loud voice, bringing her ten armed maids to her side.

“Master, there are still a few survivors.”

“That’s fine. This whole thing was a waste of time. Let’s go. Thanks for your hard work.”

“What are you people?”

As they turned to head home, a young boy approached them. The HP bar above his head had dropped low enough that it was red, so it seemed he had taken considerable damage, but there were no indications of what sort of injuries he had sustained.

“Oh! A survivor? Is this the birth of a young hero?”

“What did we do? Why did you do this to us?!”

“Oh, sorry about that. I just thought you’d be a good stand-in for the elves.”

“Elves? What does that tiny race living in Ent have to do with us?”

The boy tried to extract some logical reasoning from Youko’s words. She had done something awful, and he was desperately trying to think of what could possibly justify such an attack.

“I wanted to make a video called ‘I tried burning down the Elven Forest,’ but there aren’t any elves here. So I thought you guys would do as replacements, but I eventually decided it would be a bit too depressing to watch. I probably can’t use any of this footage, so we’re done. Oh, do you

want us to put out the fires?"

"What... What the hell is wrong with you?! What are you?!" The boy grabbed at Youko, and immediately vanished in a puff of light. The damage from the barrier around her had been enough to finish him off.

"What a waste of a young hero," she muttered.

"No matter how old they are, they always have the appearance of children, so there's no guarantee that he was actually young."

"Man, was this setup supposed to cater to lolicons or something?"

"By the way, he mentioned something interesting earlier. About the elves living in Ent."

"Ent is the island country in the east, right? I've never been there." Youko had traveled to all the important places on the continent, but she hadn't been overseas yet. "So there *are* elves... Interesting. Well, let's go on an arson tour!"

She had no idea what elves were like in this world, but going to find out would likely make for some good content.

Chapter 15 — Tomochika, the Gambling Genius

“Hey, kid, come here.”

Tomochika was enjoying herself playing card games in the casino. A woman wearing a man’s suit was calling out to her, staring at her coldly. It only took a single glance to see that she wasn’t an ordinary member of staff.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What is it?!”

“I told you, Dannoura...” Yogiri sighed from behind her. He had insisted she was going too far, but she had been too entranced by her own winning streak to pay him any mind.

“I can’t ignore the method by which you seem to be winning. We’ll have to play one-on-one.”

“O-Oh? You’re challenging me, Tomochika, the gambling genius?!”

“You get kind of weird when you’re on edge, don’t you?” Yogiri commented.

“A gambling genius would never run away from a challenge, would they?” asked the woman.

Tomochika knew she could always feign ignorance and walk away. And of course, if it came to violence, they were more than capable of fighting back. But her guilty conscience wouldn’t let her turn it down.

The woman took her, Yogiri, and the Enju robot into a small room with a single table.

“Oh, I never introduced myself. The name’s Degul, and I’m a guard here. My job is to deal with suspicious patrons,” the woman said, sitting down. There were two other staff members in the room as well. “You’re good to play some cards, right? The same game you were so proud of winning this whole time.”

It was similar to poker, where one acquired and dropped cards to build up a good hand, either raising their bet or surrendering what they had bet so far in order to quit. Tomochika had been overwhelmingly victorious.

“You deal the cards,” Degul said, motioning to Yogiri. “It won’t be fair if we do it.”

“Me? All right, I guess.” He took on the role of game master. Despite the fancy name, it simply meant that he was responsible for dealing.

“I shouldn’t have to say this, but no cheating.”

“O-Of course!” Tomochika stammered.

“And using that ghost counts as cheating,” Degul continued, pointing at Enju, who was still being controlled by Mokomoko.

“We’ve been found out!” Tomochika wailed. Mokomoko had been looking at the other players’ cards and giving that information to her descendant. That alone was a powerful advantage that no one should have been aware of.

“Card games here are strictly between the patrons. We don’t care how it ends, and it’s normal for customers to complain about cheating all the time. But you went too far. We aren’t going to ask you to return your winnings, though. That’s why I challenged you.”

If forced to play fair, Tomochika had no chance of winning, and they all knew it.

“Well, that should be enough. I can’t push too far with our special-class passengers.”

Tomochika surrendered her winnings, falling flat on the table.

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“It’s not my fault Mokomoko kept whispering information in my ear...”

What?! You’re blaming me?! cried the ghost. *If you wanted to play fair, all you had to do was say so!*

“Do you see this kind of thing a lot?” Yogiri asked the nonchalant Degul.

“Every so often. Idiots are always rolling in, thinking they can win with their skills or magic. But we’re ready for it all. We’re not naive enough to let something like that pass.”

“That makes sense. If you didn’t have some measures in place, you couldn’t open a casino in a world like this.”

“Hey! I completely forgot!” Tomochika interjected. “We weren’t even here to gamble, were we?”

“You’re the only one who forgot that,” Yogiri answered. “Can we go now?”

“Yeah. Play fair from now on.”

Leaving the private room, they returned to the main hall of the casino. There, they saw Yousuke Hiiragi, the man they had met at the port, who had told them this world was only a game. For the past few days, he had been spending his time in the casino, so they’d dropped in to have a look. It had been three days since they’d left the port. Nothing of note had happened yet, but there was no doubt they needed to keep an eye on him.

“It looks like he’s just playing the game normally,” Tomochika observed.

The guy wasn’t betting particularly large amounts of money, and he lost as often as he won, so he appeared to be like any other customer.

“I thought he’d go a bit crazier if he really believes this is all just a game.” Since Yousuke considered everyone around him to be an NPC, his manner seemed like it should have been far more arrogant.

“Well, there are people who do just play the minigames normally,” Yogiri replied. It was possible there was nothing for them to worry about. “I’m a bit concerned about the people he brought with him, though. Like that old guy.”

At Yogiri’s words, Tomochika grew curious. Yousuke had four companions. Three were young maids, but one was a ragged-looking old man. It wasn’t surprising that Yousuke would surround himself with beautiful women, but it wasn’t clear why he had an old man with him.

“I guess we shouldn’t think the worst of someone who hasn’t actually done anything wrong yet.”

“I guess. All he did so far was say some weird stuff.”

They couldn't let their guard down, but Tomochika figured they didn't need to be *quite* so careful around him.

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"Isn't there anything interesting we can do?" Tired of gambling, Youko (AKA Yousuke) was lying on the bed in her room.

"Uh-oh, it looks like Master Yousuke is going to start something," one of the maids at her side commented. Her companions had been part of her game since before she'd entered the VRRPG version of it. They were loyal to a fault and wouldn't chastise her, no matter what she did.

"How about winning all the money in the casino?"

"I did that once already." Doing the same thing over and over would just be boring, so this time she had played by the rules.

It had been three days since their cruise began. She hadn't yet done anything of note while on board. Her objective was to go to Ent and burn down the Elven Forest, so this was nothing more than travel time. It would be a pain if she went too far and ended up sinking the boat, so she had been well-behaved so far but was growing increasingly tired of it.

"What happened to the pirates? Didn't it sound like some were going to show up?"

Youko remembered hearing several NPCs talking about pirates. It was common for random conversations to actually foreshadow events to come. If that was the case, the pirate attack event might have already been set in motion, but she had yet to see any sign of it.

"If pirates did show up, that hero would deal with them, wouldn't he?"

"Yes. Hornet of the Crimson Bond," one of the maids confirmed. "That's who we saw in the port."

"How strong is he?"

"I heard he slew a whole flight of dragons single-handedly. He also defeated a Demon Lord. He seems to be a real hero among heroes. It must have cost an awful lot to hire him as an escort."

"He only claimed to kill dragons to give himself a stronger image," Youko said. "It's probably all a bluff."

"It could mean different things, anyway," the maid replied. "'Dragon' refers to a wide range of creatures, after all."

“Well, if he’s around, the pirate event is probably related to him somehow.”

If left alone, he might deal with the pirates single-handedly, or they could fight them off together. At least, that was Youko’s prediction.

“So, what would happen if we got rid of the hero?” she continued.

They had gone through the trouble of placing the character on board, so it must have meant things would get bad if the pirates’ attack succeeded.

“I don’t believe he is the only defensive force the ship has.”

“What if we crushed the others too?”

“You aren’t planning on allying with the pirates, are you?”

“Don’t you think that sounds more interesting?” Youko got out of bed. She had been painfully bored before, but with a new goal in front of her, she was suddenly feeling motivated.

“Your opponent is a hero, you know. Are you sure you can win?”

“That’s a good question. It might be impossible, but I’ll figure it out.”

Youko wasn’t conceited enough to consider herself all-powerful. There were plenty of opponents she couldn’t beat in a head-on fight. But there were any number of ways to remove the hero from the picture without direct combat.

“At the very least, I can always make it into an ‘I tried to fight the hero!’ video.”

If worse came to worst, she had numerous ways of escaping. If she was ever in danger, she could always run away, and that could make for an interesting video as well.

Youko decided to go meet the hero, Hornet.

Chapter 16 — Don’t Butt In on Random People’s Conversations, Okay?

Hornet, leader of the Crimson Bond, was at a regular check-in meeting. The voyage was going smoothly, with no problems to report. There was nothing that could serve as an obstacle to them, and they were in the middle of the open ocean. If something were to come up, they had plenty of space with which to deal with it. So for now, there wasn’t much work for Hornet to do.

He already had his subordinates keeping watch and patrolling the ship. He was, in a manner of speaking, a special guest. Having a hero like him on board was effectively a guarantee of a safe voyage. He was being used almost like an advertising piece. He wasn’t sure that was entirely acceptable, but he wasn’t really in a position to be picking his jobs.

As heroes became more and more famous, they ended up getting less and less work. Hornet would have been happy to take on any small job, but his clients didn’t bring such requests to him. They felt that if they were going to request the aid of a hero, they needed a task befitting of one. And with incidents that absolutely required a hero being few and far between, Hornet and his group were generally quite bored.

As he lamented his situation, the meeting came to an end. Rising from his seat, Hornet headed back to his room among the first-class cabins on the top level of the accommodations section. Taking the elevator up, he got off on his floor, where he immediately encountered two girls in swimwear.

“Come on, Diane... You can’t be doing this...” he grumbled.

Cheerfully making their way down the corridor were his older sister, Diane, and his younger sister, Miliana. Diane held a large ball, while Miliana carried a floatation ring. They were still quite far from the pool, but it looked like they were already getting into it.

“I-It’s fine, isn’t it? We have nothing to do anyway!” Diane protested.

“That’s not exactly true.”

Short of a sudden emergency, there wasn't anything in particular for them to do at the moment, and they were aware that they weren't expected to be acting as the ship's regular security force. But Hornet thought it would be best for them to be on their guard, just in case.

"We're not slacking off, though. Yeah, this is part of our mission!" she insisted.

"Going to the pool?"

"Who knows what could happen there? And anyway, look, I've got my weapon with me!"

A belt was wrapped around Diane's exposed back, and her staff was hanging from it. Miliana's getup was the same, although in her case the weapon in question was a shortsword.

"Fine. But don't go wild. We've got a reputation to think about."

"I know, I know!"

The two girls boarded the elevator in high spirits.

"I'm still not sure it's a good idea..."

Harboring doubts, Hornet returned to his room.

"I'm back."

"Oh, welcome back, Hou."

"I saw my sisters on the way here."

His mother was elegantly sipping some tea. He was honestly glad that she hadn't donned a swimsuit and gone along with them.

"They were so insistent about going to the pool," she said, "especially after they went through the trouble of bringing their swimsuits."

"That's weird. Were they treating this like a holiday all along? Waiting in our room is part of the job..." He sat down at the table as he grumbled.

"Don't worry. If anything happens, we have you!"

"There are plenty of problems I wouldn't be able to handle on my own."

"If pirates show up, you won't have to do anything, will you?"

"Yeah, there's another unit ready to deal with them."

One might wonder why Hornet was even there in the first place, but his presence was more for something that ordinary soldiers couldn't hope to handle rather than mundane threats.

Hornet of the Crimson Bond was a name known far and wide. Hero, Imperial Sword, High Wizard, and Harem Master. Each was a class of the highest level, and he possessed all four, giving him an astonishingly high

value in the eyes of others.

“With no icebergs, we don’t have much to do.”

“Mom, don’t butt in on random people’s conversations, okay?” Hornet remembered the incident back at the port. For some reason, a girl had been worrying about icebergs despite their route being so far south.

“Well, it appeared to be their first time on a cruise! They seemed to be feeling very uneasy!”

“Maybe. She was pretty cute too, wasn’t she?” As he thought back on their encounter, his heart rate quickened slightly.

“Hou...your bad side is starting to show again.”

“It’s not that at all!”

“Simply being a Hero and an Imperial Sword should have been enough, but a Harem Master too? It’s so embarrassing for me.”

“I didn’t become a Harem Master because I wanted to!”

Hornet had plenty of lovers. Without any particular effort on his part, he ended up attracting all sorts of women. And since he had no desire to turn them away, he kept up relationships with all of them. Normally, such a situation could easily devolve into open warfare, but that was where the class of Harem Master came into play. It made the women satisfied to be one among his crowd of lovers.

“Then you’ll leave that girl alone, right?”

“Well...”

He couldn’t bring himself to say it. Now that he had become aware of her, she was hard to ignore. That was pretty rare. Normally, women would come straight to him without him having done anything special, so he was barely conscious of his own sexual appetites. But this time it was different. He could tell that his body was longing for that girl. Of course, that wasn’t something he could plainly say to his own mother.

As he was wondering how to put his feelings into words, the ship began to shake.

“What was that?!” his mother yelped as an unnerving, creaking sound surrounded them.

After a while, the shaking stopped.

“Sounds like trouble. I’m going to go take a look.” Grateful for his luck, Hornet rose from his seat.

“You look awfully relieved, don’t you? We’ll talk about this again later.”

Pretending he hadn't heard her, he headed for the door, but before he got there, the knob began to turn on its own.

"Are the girls back?" asked his mother.

If it had been his sisters, they would have unlocked the door and come in right away. But whoever was outside was turning the doorknob only slightly. In short, someone was up to no good.

"Mom, be careful!"

Hornet urged his mother back and stepped in front of her. After a moment, the door opened, revealing two men he didn't know. One was a young man, well-kept, around twenty years old. The other was much older, wrapped in rags and standing behind the younger one.

"That lock was a hard one to pick, which makes sense for a first-class cabin," the young man said, clearly impressed.

"Who are you?!"

"Couldn't you think of something a bit more clever to say? That's NPCs for you, I guess."

Hornet's first thought was that they were there to rob him, but the young man seemed far too laid back for that. Using his Discernment skill, he learned that the intruder's name was Yousuke Hiiragi. He possessed the Gift, with his class being VRRPG Player.

That didn't tell Hornet much at all. "Player" likely meant something like "participant" or "contestant," but he had no idea what VRRPG might stand for.

The stranger was level ninety-nine, the upper limit for an ordinary human who had obtained the Gift. His stats were appropriate for his level, and he didn't seem to possess any particularly noteworthy skills. He wouldn't stand a chance against a hero.

But could Hornet really write him off as small fry? Judging from his name, there was a possibility he had come from a different world. Hornet couldn't let his guard down. Visitors from other worlds often had unique abilities.

"Wait, are you a pirate?!" He drew his sword but didn't attack immediately. Even against an intruder, he was cautious, waiting to see how the situation played out.

"No, not at all."

"Then what are you doing breaking into someone's room?"

“Oh, I guess I’m closer to a pirate than I thought. I *am* going to be taking his valuables, after all,” the other man said to his companion.

“I asked why you’re here!”

“You’re a hero, right? I wanted to see what a hero was like.”

“You could have visited me normally!”

“I’d never seen a lock like that before, so I wanted to see if I could crack it.”

“Are you messing with me? You’re trespassing. You can’t complain if we attack you.”

“That’s right. I wanted to try fighting you. If you’d like to attack first, that’s fine.”

“All right, so you are just a burglar, then!” Hornet couldn’t help but think Yousuke’s behavior was illogical. Maybe the guy had lost his mind, but either way, he was up to no good.

Without moving from his spot, he swung his sword. After a certain level, range meant nothing to a swordsman. For someone like Hornet, who had the classes of Hero and Imperial Sword, a distance of a few meters was nothing. The flash of his blade should have easily severed Yousuke’s arm.

“Jeez, this guy is crazy strong! I guess that’s a hero for you.”

“What?!”

Yousuke had blocked the slash with a pot. It had been placed inside the room as decoration, and while it was certainly a high-quality piece, it shouldn’t have been anywhere near that sturdy. Yet the delicately crafted item blocked Hornet’s attack completely. He hadn’t even seen him pick it up. Yousuke was suddenly just holding it in front of him.

“Yeah, everyone’s shocked the first time they see that,” the intruder remarked. “The viewers probably already figured it out, but I used Bullet Time from the Tactical Support System to grab the pot, then locked it to make it indestructible.”

Hornet realized his opponent must have reinforced the object somehow, but it was still just a small pot that he could hold in one hand. There was a limit to how much someone could defend themselves with it, no matter how resilient it was. There was some other power at work that he didn’t know about.

So he stopped holding back.

“Thousand Slaying Slash!”

If the other man could block a single attack, Hornet simply needed to use a technique that couldn't be blocked or dodged. He would unleash countless overlapping blows and completely overwhelm his foe.

He swung his sword in every direction. If Yousuke took the attack head-on, he would be sliced so finely that there would be nothing left of him. But something felt wrong. The holy sword that had always served him well suddenly felt extremely heavy in his hands. The recoil from his strikes was so severe that it felt like it could take his arms clean off, and it took him an unreasonable amount of strength to control the trajectory of the blade.

The sensation only lasted for a moment, though. Finishing his routine, Hornet looked at Yousuke with ragged breaths. The intruder remained unharmed. In front of the nonchalant young man, his older companion, who had been standing behind him until that point, had collapsed to the floor.

"This is getting dicey," Yousuke commented. "Can I actually beat this guy? Oh, I suppose I should probably explain. This guy wanted to deliver some medicine to his grandkid. While the quest is ongoing, he's immortal. So that makes him a really good shield. And until you finish the quest, you can get a lot of use out of just taking him around with you."

Although the old man was lying on the ground, he didn't seem to have any injuries. Even after taking the full force of the Thousand Slaying Slash, he was still in one piece.

"Anyway, you called it the Thousand Slaying Slash, but that was only about a hundred, right?"

"What did you do?" Hornet couldn't help but question him upon hearing the other man's words. It was too strange. He couldn't just ignore what he had seen.

"I turned the difficulty down to Very Easy. Anyway, it's my turn now!"

Yousuke threw a knife. It was a reasonably strong attack with considerable speed. Hornet dodged it and moved to counter, but the knife embedded itself in his right shoulder.

He had definitely dodged it, and a plain knife shouldn't have been able to pierce a hero's clothes anyway. In light of the bizarre occurrence, Hornet stopped. He hadn't taken any significant damage, so he made to continue his attack with only a moment's delay, but he was once again stopped by a sudden and intense pain.

"Hou!" his mother screamed.

An attack had come from his flank. A middle-aged man had appeared out of nowhere, plunging a sword deep into his side. This strike wasn't anything like Yousuke's. Hornet moved to deal with the new arrival first, but the moment he did, the man vanished.

"Wow, that's a hero for you. Even on Very Easy mode, he doesn't die in one hit."

Hornet couldn't be defeated this way. Even with his internal organs pierced, he could continue fighting, but he hesitated. This man was completely unlike anyone he had ever fought. He had no idea how to deal with him.

"I guess I'll explain that too," Yousuke offered. "The man who just appeared was from a skill I have. Whenever I attack, there's a chance a mysterious guy will appear out of nowhere to help me. Even I don't know when it's going to happen, so no matter how much you watch me, you'll never be able to see it coming."

It must have been some sort of Summoning magic. But even knowing that, without any warning at all, there was no way to deal with it.

"The knife was a normal critical attack. Crits always hit and ignore defense stats. You might think they're unreliable, but there's a skill that lets you stock them up. So if you build them up beforehand, you can trigger a crit whenever you feel like it."

Even with Yousuke's explanation, Hornet was at a total loss. There were some people who called exceptionally well-placed attacks "critical hits," but he'd never heard anything about them landing on a target who had already dodged, or penetrating the legendary-grade equipment of a hero.

Hornet was being overpowered. He was so much stronger that it seemed impossible for him to lose, but it felt like there was nothing he could do. Of course, if he went all-out, he should have been able to win. But if he did that, it was unlikely that the ship, never mind the other passengers, would come through it unharmed. He wasn't prepared to risk all of their lives.

"How interesting..." he muttered, startling himself.

But there was nothing interesting about it. The thought had never even crossed his mind, yet his mouth had spoken of its own accord.

"Very well. I'll take it from here."

Hornet's consciousness abruptly shut down.

Chapter 17 — That's Cheating!

Long ago, the seven High Wizards had been defeated by a man calling himself the Great Sage. Izelda didn't remember the details of the fight. He merely had a strong memory of being entirely helpless. It had been the first decisive defeat of his long life, an earth-shattering experience to one who considered himself not only the strongest of the High Wizards, but the strongest in the world.

Five of the High Wizards had survived the battle. The Great Sage must have considered the others utterly inconsequential, killing two of them almost by accident during their casual dealings. They were nothing to him.

The surviving five had all responded differently. One had given up everything—the glory, wealth, authority, and magic of the title—had thrown it all away and retreated into isolation, likely dying early on.

Another had aligned with the Great Sage, becoming a Sage himself. Perhaps his intention had been to seek more power, but from Izelda's perspective, it had looked like running away. No matter how much stronger the wizard became, he would never be able to defeat their adversary.

The remaining three had sworn to overthrow the Great Sage, but they had each taken a different approach. One had begun blindly training. Convinced that he was superior, he sought further power only from within himself. However, as someone who had reached the rank of High Wizard, he had already surpassed his own limits. No matter how much he may have subjected himself to suffering, or how far he pushed his body, he no longer had any room to grow. Izelda didn't know what had happened to him. He'd heard the man had challenged the Great Sage once again, but it had likely been an act of desperate self-abandonment with no chance of success.

One had sought a different kind of power. He'd researched ancient magics, the magic of the dragon language, the blessings of the Dark Gods, and the favor of the divine. Apparently, he had reached some degree of success, as his name was still remembered. He was known as Eglacia and had become famous for many legendary feats, such as the sealing of a Dark God

and the construction of the walls that guarded the capital of Manii, but he had never reached the level of the Great Sage.

Regardless, Izelda felt that the powers they had known about up until then were insufficient for defeating the Great Sage. The power that would defeat him was the power that he, the Great Sage himself, possessed. The correct method was to use the Gift. It was a power that had overtaken the world in no time at all, completely changing its underlying principles. Through the inheritance of the Gift, a class would be assigned, and depending on one's class, unique powers would emerge. This new system overwhelmed every other form of power in the world.

Izelda had obtained the Gift from the beings known as the Kouryu. The fallen dragons were connected to the root of the system and possessed the highest level of the Gift—one entirely unrelated to that of the Sages. Not even the Great Sage could interfere with the Gift from a lineage other than his own.

If one sought the Gift, they needed to get as close to the original source as possible. That had gone well for Izelda, but there was one problem: the Gift had a tendency to become more and more specialized as it was passed down through the generations. In short, being closer to the source opened up many possibilities, but those possibilities weren't necessarily useful. So the power Izelda had acquired ended up being something that had no chance of defeating the Great Sage.

He then turned to reincarnation instead.

The rules that determined the kind of Gift that would manifest were still shrouded in mystery, but even so, the direction of its transformation as it was passed down through the generations was known to be decided by the "parent" providing it and the inheritor's own nature. One's natural talent for the Gift was decided at birth, and the only source available to Izelda had been that of the Kouryu, so no matter how many times he repeated the process, he would merely obtain the same Gift. In addition, one could only receive it a preset number of times, so if one filled their available space with useless Gifts, that would be the end of it.

However, if one's talent for the Gift was determined at birth, they simply needed to be reborn. That would solve the issue of running out of space, allowing them to try again as many times as necessary. If one of his descendants manifested a useful Gift, he could reincarnate his consciousness

into them and create a powerful new lineage of his own.

Izelda reincarnated himself numerous times in this way. Eventually, he came to decide that restricting himself to existing as a single being was unnecessary. Multiplying and fusing himself into multiple bodies was far more efficient. Increasing his number of subjects was vital to his success.

The descendants who carried Izelda's essence spread out across the world. One of those was Hornet, so as with his other reincarnated bodies, Izelda's consciousness lay dormant within him.

Hornet himself had no knowledge of this. He had been born and raised as himself, and if nothing had happened to interrupt that, he would have continued to live a normal life until he died. To Izelda, he was nothing more than a checkpoint on the road to ultimate supremacy. After having been reincarnated so many times, Izelda was no longer interested in experiencing everyday life. Hornet's only job was to expand the bloodline, and that was something that could be left entirely to him.

However, Izelda's consciousness had now been stimulated. He was always analyzing the people around him. If that analysis ever discovered a person of real ability, his consciousness would be brought out in order to conduct a thorough examination.

He had become curious about the girl that Hornet had met at the port. She didn't possess the Gift, so her talent for it was unknown, but her body was deeply interesting. She possessed incredibly efficient sensory organs, nerves, and muscle tissue. It was a body that seemed totally unnatural, like it was the result of some sort of experiment.

Izelda had taken a deep interest in the girl. The power that he sought was not only that of the Gift. In order to defeat the Great Sage, a wide range of resources would be necessary. And so he manipulated Hornet's consciousness slightly, making him take an interest in the girl, subtly pushing him to eventually make plans to connect with her, and then ultimately produce children. Acquiring such valuable specimens and adding them to the bloodline would produce ever more powerful vessels for him to reincarnate into.

It was something that Izelda had done many times before.

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And so the former High Wizard now rose to the surface of Hornet's consciousness to deal with the danger he was currently facing.

The stranger before them continued to deliver baffling, unimaginable attacks one after another. Izelda wanted to take those skills for himself. His only goal was to obtain greater power, so it hardly mattered to him what happened to the other passengers on the ship. Surfacing in Hornet's consciousness would no doubt erase the other's personality and social status, but to Izelda, the boy was only a single stone among the many that paved his way, and he had plenty of stones if needed. Acquiring Yousuke's body at any cost was far more important to him than preserving the life form he was inhabiting. And so he made his decision.

"Hou?" Hornet's mother's voice called out hesitantly. She must have realized that something about him had changed.

"Preta's Soul."

Izelda brought his magic to bear. A black sphere appeared, covering the body of the fallen old man. Countless pinpricks of light encompassed it, giving the impression of the entire night sky being condensed into a ball. Then it vanished, taking everything within along with it. A chunk of the room had been gouged out, and the old man's body had vanished.

"You said he was immortal, but it wasn't enough to save him from being sent into Subspace."

"What the hell is that? That's cheating!"

Yousuke must have realized that if he were struck by the spell, it would be over for him in an instant. However, Izelda's goal wasn't to throw him into some unknown Subspace pocket forever. He needed to capture Yousuke alive in order to study him.

His first thought was to use some sort of gas. If he filled the area with a paralyzing vapor, there would be no way for the young man to dodge it. But Izelda didn't have any relevant spells, so he decided on an alternative method.

"Insects That Dance Like Mist."

He stretched a hand towards Yousuke, and it unraveled like it was made of string, spreading outward in a black haze.

"What's that? Are those bugs?! No, bugs are definitely not okay!"

It was a cloud of tiny insects. A great enough number of bugs was just as good as releasing a gas. If they managed to infiltrate the target's body, they

could disable or paralyze it at will.

But Yousuke's reaction was fast. Rather than futilely trying to combat the cloud of insects, he turned and ran. Perhaps, per his words, he was terrified of the insects themselves.

"Hou? Are you..." Hornet's mother asked timidly. Hornet must have seemed to be in tremendous pain.

Izelda returned his arm to its original state, but the magical energy he had expended wouldn't be so easily replaced. As a developing body, it wasn't strong enough to provide for the needs of a High Wizard like himself.

"Hm. This level of magical energy is insufficient. My apologies, mother. Would you please provide some for me?"

There was no need to go through the trouble of speaking with her. If he wanted magical energy from her, all he had to do was wring it out of her. But Izelda waited for Hornet's mother to grasp the situation, for her to realize that her son had disappeared, that the person standing in front of her was someone else entirely. Izelda wanted to see the moment her face twisted in despair.

"Who...are you?"

"I'm Hornet. Your son, right?" He used his freshly reconstituted left hand to grab her face. "How unlucky for you, mother. If nothing had happened, you could have lived out your life with your beloved son in peace."

He drained the magical energy from her, turning her into a dried-up, desiccated shell. Then he threw her body to the ground like the garbage it had become.

"Now then. I suppose I don't have much time to waste."

Hornet's body wouldn't be able to survive Izelda's presence for long. He would have to achieve his objectives before his current form was destroyed.

Chapter 18 — She Was Unable to Keep Everything Inside, So Her Flesh Just Spilled Out

Tomochika was lying on a lounge chair beside the pool, enjoying the resort-like atmosphere to the fullest. Naturally her swimsuit-clad figure attracted all sorts of attention, but she was used to it, so it didn't bother her.

"Heh heh. These fools see nothing more than an erotic body. They know nothing of the brutal muscle hidden beneath that supple layer of fat!" Mokomoko said proudly from where she lay beside her descendant. She was still using Enju's body, wearing a swimsuit herself.

"Don't call it fat!" Tomochika complained. Her body looked soft, but that softness was coupled with strength. Although Tomochika hadn't been aware of it until recently, that was one result of many generations of effort by the Dannoura family to perfect their bodies, according to Mokomoko.

"And because your flesh is so much more dense, you are also a lot heavier than you look!"

"Don't call me heavy either!"

"But weight is an important factor when it comes to combat."

"Then isn't my sister more suited to being the head of the family?" she replied. Mokomoko averted her eyes. "Why are you looking away like that?"

"Your sister is a rare failure. Her body failed to accommodate the Dannoura traits. She was unable to keep everything inside, so her flesh just spilled out..."

"Have I accidentally unearthed some dark secret about our family?! Wait, then what about you? Are you a failure too?"

"I was born before we began managing the bloodline, so I don't count!"

"I thought she just took a lot of her looks from you..."

But thinking back, no one else in her family had such a rotund shape. Her sister must have been something special.

“Well, putting that aside...” Tomochika changed the subject. “It feels kind of wrong to be playing in a freshwater pool on a boat that’s sailing across the ocean.”

“It is certainly a luxurious way of using water,” Mokomoko mused. “But it is possible there is magic in this world to produce such water from thin air.”

Tomochika was relaxing, drinking her tropical juice under a parasol. Yogiri, of course, was sleeping, so she just let him be. If he woke up and she wasn’t there, he’d probably just pull out his game to kill time.

“Why didn’t you bring the boy with you?” Mokomoko complained. “This would have been a great chance to seduce him.”

“No, that sounds terrible. He’d definitely stare at me the whole time.” She didn’t care much about strangers looking at her, but she hesitated at the thought of Yogiri doing it.

“I suppose. He would definitely ogle you nonstop,” the ghost admitted.

Yogiri himself would be the first to confess that he was one to fully enjoy a situation if it happened by sheer chance. Tomochika could easily imagine him arguing that if she was going to wear a swimsuit, it meant that she was okay with him staring at her.

“Hey, doesn’t it seem like we’re actually going to make it without incident this time?” Tomochika asked. Everything was perfectly peaceful, with no signs that something might go wrong.

“You realize you’re setting a flag, right?”

“No, there’s no way. All we’re doing is traveling by boat.”

“When we ‘just’ rode a train, there was plenty of trouble.”

“Come on, we’re in the middle of the ocean. What could possibly happen?”

“Something may come up with the passengers.”

Tomochika got up and stepped over to look out at the sea from the side of the ship. The weather was perfect. There was nothing to block her view as far as she could see, and even the waves were gentle.

“At the very least, I doubt anything will come from outside—”

Tomochika was cut off by the ship suddenly beginning to shake. As she stood there, confused, something leaped out of the water—a massive tentacle, white, long, and covered in suction cups. The enormous appendage quickly descended from the sky to strike the ship, sending tremors through it to match

the screams coming from within.

"As expected, something came from outside," Mokomoko commented.

"I knew something like this was going to happen!" Tomochika cried.

"Hm. It may be a type of kraken. A rather standard sea monster."

"What is that?! A giant squid or octopus or something?"

She looked around the ship. A number of enormous tentacles had emerged from the water and wrapped themselves around the body of the vessel, each large enough to completely restrain it. If it was in fact a cephalopod of some sort, its body would be much larger.

"There appear to be more than eight," Mokomoko observed, "so I suppose it isn't an octopus. Or is there more than one creature?"

"Is this the kind of trouble they expected for the voyage?"

"If it was, they wouldn't have made it feel like such a resort."

"Right?!"

The passengers had fallen into panic. Their luxurious sea cruise had instantly been transformed into a horror story by the appearance of this sea monster. Asking them to calm down would have been pointless, but evaluating the situation with a level head, it became apparent that the tentacles weren't doing anything other than grabbing the ship. They weren't continuing to strike, nor were they trying to crush them.

"So what do we do now?" Being in the middle of the ocean, there was nowhere for them to run.

"Hey, boy. Are you awake?" Mokomoko asked, using the communication device she had made out of Furemaru, the weapon they'd acquired from the Aggressor.

I just woke up.

"We've got some trouble. A kraken is attacking the ship!"

Let me take a look outside. Ah, those tentacles. Is it like a squid?

"Let us regroup. We will head to your location now." There wasn't anywhere particularly safe for them to go, so Mokomoko decided their best bet was to reunite with Yogiri.

Where are you now?

"The pool at the front end of the ship."

And I'm on the top level at the back. I guess we should meet up in the middle.

The boat was enormous. If they both moved at once, they could meet up

much faster.

"Takatou, can you do something about this thing?" Tomochika asked.

I don't feel any killing intent from it. Right now it just seems like a wild animal trying to play with us. I'd feel bad for attacking it over something like that.

"Playing with us? One hit from those tentacles would be enough to kill someone..."

"It seems to be acting rather strangely for a wild animal," Mokomoko added.

Since the kraken hadn't done anything after wrapping its tentacles around the boat, Yogiri preferred to wait and see what would happen.

"Everyone, please calm down!" a girl in a swimsuit called out to the nearby passengers. "We are from Crimson Bond and are in charge of defending this ship!"

Apparently, Crimson Bond was a well-known group, as her declaration made the panicking passengers calm down considerably.

"As you all know, we are a mercenary group led by the hero Hornet. A monster like this is nothing to him!"

Despite the enormous size of the creature, it seemed that everyone shared the belief that it was something the hero could defeat.

"Crimson Bond are the friends of that guy we talked to before leaving port, right?" Tomochika remembered hearing that Hornet could vaporize an iceberg in an instant. Apparently, they had been serious about that.

"Indeed. The boy who was with his mother. She mentioned they had been hired to guard the ship during its voyage."

"Have they actually been protecting us?"

The two girls were wearing swimsuits and dripping wet, so they had obviously been swimming in the pool. The girl who had spoken carried a sword and looked to be about Tomochika's age. The other held a staff and seemed to be the older of the two. Considering they had their weapons, it didn't look like they had forgotten about their jobs entirely, but it seemed like they had been enjoying the floating resort's amenities along the way.

"Let's leave this to them and get a move on." There wasn't much Tomochika could do to help. They would leave the evacuation to Crimson Bond.

The ship began to shake again. Looking around, she saw that one of the

tentacles was wriggling. One of its suction cups suddenly split open and something slipped out of it.

Tomochika doubted her eyes. A set of simple metal stairs had extended from the tentacle, landing on the deck. There were only a few creatures who would use such a construction, so it wasn't much of a surprise to her when humans began descending them.

"Greetings. We are pirates."

"So there are pirates after all!" Tomochika shouted. "Now we're really going to run into an iceberg, aren't we?!"

Ten people came down the stairs. Similar structures were emerging from the other tentacles as well, so she assumed the same thing was happening all over the ship. The group referring to themselves as pirates seemed awfully varied. The man who had first spoken wore armor that made him look like a knight, and he had a soft demeanor. But behind him were all kinds of people, from those who could be recognized as pirates at a glance to men who looked like brutish warrior types to women who looked like artisans.

"Our objective is to take you hostage and ransom you," the knight continued. "As such, if you kindly cooperate, no harm will come to you. We hope for a wise response."

"Huh? Are we not going to be able to get out of here?" Tomochika asked.

"Indeed. If we try to act recklessly, it may devolve into fighting."

"Can you, like, rush them and self-destruct or something?"

"Of course not! What do you think I am?!"

The two girls from Crimson Bond moved forward to confront the intruders.

"Did you not know that we, Crimson Bond, were aboard this ship? It's pretty unlucky for you to have picked us as your target," said the older girl holding the staff. She seemed somehow rougher than the younger one.

"No, we were fully aware of your presence. So, you are Crimson Bond, then. That would make you Diane of the Blue Flame and Miliana the Sword Princess, correct?" the knight responded, indicating the older and then younger girl in turn.

"You are aware that you can't defeat us with these numbers, right?"

"We were told to dispatch any combatants who were not ordinary passengers. Naturally, you are no exception."

"I see. Then I suppose I don't need to hold back!" Diane raised her staff.

Numerous balls of fire surrounded her in an instant. As if the scope of her magic had taken them off guard, the pirates' faces immediately went pale. "I'll make you regret targeting this ship! I'll burn your bones to ash!"

But the balls of fire failed to accomplish what Diane had expected. Without ever firing, they simply vanished. Astonished, she swung her staff a number of times, but her magic failed to activate.

"My lady, you're going to give us all heart attacks!" the knight called out to someone emerging from within the ship.

"You guys rely on me too much. I figure this sort of thing is good for you once in a while."

"Our plan is all based on your power. It would be a problem for us if you continued to act so irresponsibly."

The new arrival was a woman wearing a man's suit.

"Th-That's... She's a pirate?!" Tomochika remembered her. It was Degul, from the casino staff. She had crushed Tomochika in the card game earlier. It seemed she outranked the knight.

"Damn you!" Seeing Diane made powerless, Miliana leaped into action. In one swift motion, a man dressed like an actual pirate swung his cutlass downwards, beheading her so easily it was almost absurd.

"No way... Miliana..." Diane immediately lost the will to fight. She had originally acted like the two of them could handle ten pirates with no problem, but that confidence was nowhere to be seen now.

"I see," Mokomoko remarked. "She seemed so confident that you would be unable to use any tricks during your card game with her because she possesses the ability to nullify others' powers."

"But Miliana was a swordswoman, right?"

"It is likely she relied on the Gift to fight."

"So wait, are you okay, Mokomoko?!"

"My powers are being suppressed considerably. Luckily I am still able to control Enju, but I won't be able to modify Furemaru."

"Speaking of which, where is Furemaru now that I'm in a swimsuit?" Normally, it was concealed as a part of her clothing, but that didn't seem practical given her current outfit.

"There is a considerable amount of empty space inside Enju, so I've placed it there."

"Are we cut off from Takatou?"

“The piece I gave the boy is just a receiver, so I should still be able to contact him.”

“What’s the difference?!”

“Either way, we’ll need to do something about this without relying on Furemaru.”

Luckily, the two of them were thought to be ordinary passengers, but if they wanted to leave, they’d have to do something about the pirates first.

“Yo, boss! What do we do with the other one?” one of the pirates called out.

“Kill her,” Degul responded instantly.

“Don’t you think we could use a woman like her alive?”

“No. Our job is to kidnap rich people and ransom them. There’s nothing to be gained from taking a woman who won’t make us any money. If you want one that badly, you can pay for a pro once you’re off work.”

“Fine.”

The pirate cut Diane down. She had just been standing there, frozen in place. It didn’t seem like she had any experience in close-quarters combat.

“All right, everyone,” the knight addressed the passengers. “This kidnapping is all business. We’re not going to request an absurd amount of money. Once we’ve acquired a reasonable sum for each of you, you will be set free, so please remain calm.”

“That’s going to be a lot of work for the pigeons...” Tomochika mumbled, remembering that magical carrier pigeons were used to send money here.

Chapter 19 — We Came to Spoil Something for You!

Youko wasn't invincible in this world. Since her powers came from the game, they were also limited by it.

One of those limits was the guard system. Those who patrolled towns would always notice if she committed any illegal acts in public, and they would appear out of nowhere to apprehend her. They weren't invincible, and Youko could even defeat them in battle, but every time she did, they would become stronger. As she committed more crimes, the guards would continue to grow in power until she couldn't beat them anymore.

Being captured wasn't Game Over, but she would be trapped in prison for a time, where her stats would continuously drop. So Youko generally chose to act like an ordinary adventurer while she was in the towns. The restrictions placed on criminals were too much of a threat to her daily life. However, as long as she didn't do anything to brand herself a criminal, she could do whatever she wanted.

For example, she could create a closed-off room. As long as she was in a place where guards wouldn't normally go, there would be no issue. If she were to take over a mansion and seal all of the exits and entrances, the guards would have no way of knowing what crimes were being committed inside. Alternatively, since guards only really existed in larger cities, she could always go to more rural settlements. Some guards patrolled the highways, but there weren't too many of them, so she could avoid them if she was careful.

In addition, there were no guards on boats. They had soldiers whose job was to protect the ship from outside threats, but they weren't considered to be guards by the game. "Guards" were affiliated with the state, so private passenger ships were beyond their jurisdiction.

With that in mind, she figured picking the lock of a first-class cabin or attacking a hero wouldn't be counted as criminal acts. Of course, she would have to be careful when facing off with a hero, but by dropping the difficulty

level, she figured she'd be able to manage.

At first, things went well. She could even defeat the hero in battle if she set the difficulty to Very Easy. But for some reason, her opponent had changed. He had suddenly begun using attacks that were completely different from before, taking Youko by surprise. She'd felt a bit worried after he had so easily erased the NPC she'd brought with her, and then he had summoned a huge swarm of insects. That was one of Youko's weaknesses. The Tactical Support System could track multiple enemies, but it would freeze if there were too many at once.

So she had immediately fled. She was completely reliant on the TSS for combat, so she would have been utterly defenseless against the swarm. It was possible to fight without the system's support, but that required an entirely different mindset.

Right after escaping, she activated her stealth skill, then got as far away as possible before hiding in a random room. The stealth skill could be used and leveled up in a variety of ways, so her current level was extremely high. Finding her when she was making a serious effort to hide would be next to impossible.

"What a nuisance. Maybe I should have left him alone."

Youko was not a battle junkie. She enjoyed winning in combat but only when she could overwhelm an opponent with minimal effort. She didn't enjoy the process of developing a complex strategy to defeat a powerful foe and only winning by the skin of her teeth.

"Maybe I should lock him up somewhere? He probably has some sort of warp ability, though."

Trapping NPCs in places was something she very much enjoyed and did often. She would lead them into a closed room, make the room indestructible, then put an indestructible object in the way of the exit. The NPCs would do everything they could to escape but eventually fell into despair and lost their minds. That had been her backup plan if she'd found the hero too difficult to defeat: lock him away somewhere so that he couldn't deal with the pirates.

But now she wasn't sure that plan would work against him. She was uneasy at the prospect of trying it against someone who could move through Subspace.

"My main objective is to get to Ent and burn down the Elven Forest, so I could just ignore all of this anyway. I don't *have* to defeat him; maybe I'll

just mess with him a bit."

The thought of running and hiding irked her. She wanted to do something that would make for good content. She began pacing around the room, trying to think of what exactly that content should entail.

But something felt off. She wasn't sure what it was at first but soon found her answer in the mirror. In it she saw a skinny woman, staring back at her with wide eyes.

"Huh?" Youko froze at the all too familiar sight. It wasn't the avatar Yousuke Hiiragi, but rather the image of Youko herself. "What's going on?"

"Aw, I was hoping for a more dramatic reveal."

As she stared in shock, she heard a voice from behind her. Turning, she saw two girls who looked like twins. Unlike her seedy-looking self, they were genuinely cute.

"I'm Malna!"

"I'm Rilna!"

"The two together are...Malnarilna! Yay!" They clapped in sync.

"Wh-Who are you...?"

"We're God!"

"We came to spoil something for you!"

"We wanted to come surprise you before you figured it out yourself!"

"The truth is, this game—"

"—isn't a game at all!"

"It's another world!"

"You actually died in your home world!"

"What?"

The two spoke in rapid succession, making it hard for her to keep up. She didn't understand what they were saying at first.

"There was an experiment to try and imitate all human senses, so they stuck a needle into your head and pumped electricity into it."

"And then *bam*! Your brain was fried!"

"But we thought, wouldn't it be funny if you thought it was a game?"

"So we made it seem like it was."

"We made a body for you here and pulled your soul into it."

"Then we gave you powers that made it seem like you were in a video game!"

Deciding to try to attack these two strangers, Youko made the usual

gesture to open up the system window. But nothing happened.

"Right now, someone is using a power to nullify all other abilities."

"Your powers are all part of the Battle Song system."

"So if someone uses a really strong power to nullify it, there's nothing you can do!"

No matter how many times she tried, the window wouldn't open. The Tactical Support System wouldn't activate, and she couldn't use any magic. She couldn't change the game's settings or even look at her stats.

But Youko was still unable to believe what the girls were saying. She couldn't possibly be in another world, where monsters lived and magic was real. It was far more believable that this was all just part of the game. Even now, it was more natural to think there was some sort of problem with the system that was preventing her from executing commands. These two must have been developers who had come in to explain the problem. Their original explanation had been a prank, but they would surely tell her what was going on any minute now.

"Come on now, use some common sense," one of the girls said. "Do you really think anyone could make a game this realistic?"

"B-But...I was told it was technology that hadn't been made public yet! That it was, like, super advanced, secret military technology!"

"Wait, you really believed that? Weren't you suspicious at all?"

Youko remembered having felt a vague sense of suspicion at one point, but after she'd started the game and seen the system window, she had stopped worrying.

"It would be way more difficult to make a whole world in VR—"

"—than it would be to add AR to another world!"

"Well, most of the powers in this world come from Battle Song."

"It's kind of like a game already."

"It's pretty easy to misunderstand!"

"B-But why would gods from another world know about something like video games? That's weird, right? You must be working for the developers!"

"We don't know that much about them."

"We just peek into other worlds to see what kind of culture and entertainment they have."

"Th-There's no way I died though, right?! I'm alive right now!"

"Well, I mean..."

“We are God.”

A sudden light appeared from behind the twins, forcing Youko to her knees. She had been struck by a primal fear, an emotion drawn from looking upon something truly enormous, rooted in her most basic instincts. Something that wouldn’t let Youko stand. And with it, whether she wanted to or not, she was forced to accept that this world was not a game. She couldn’t help but recognize that bringing her back from the dead and taking her to this world would be possible for these two.

“So, about all the people you killed so far...”

“None of them were NPCs.”

“They were all born and raised in this world.”

“They felt pain, and they got hungry.”

“They loved, got married, and had children.”

“They were ordinary people, living ordinary lives.”

Despite hearing that, Youko didn’t feel guilty right away. The violence filter had made all of those deaths as cartoonish as possible. Even after being told that real people were dying, it didn’t seem true.

“So...what am I supposed to do, then?”

“Huh?”

“What?”

As if praying, Youko tried to grasp at these twins who had called themselves God, but all they gave her were confused looks.

“We don’t really care.”

“We just wanted to see how you would react when we spoiled it for you.”

“It was supposed to be such a shock, but what a weird response.”

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“Wh-Why did you do this? Is this what you call fun?!”

“Yep.”

“Of course it’s fun.”

“Just like you thought it was.”

“You enjoyed being really powerful and playing with the lives of all those NPCs, right?”

“You had fun toying with all their fates, right?”

“We enjoy doing the same thing.”

“Really, being a god is kind of boring.”

“It really makes you want to meddle in things.”

“Anyway, it’s time for us to go!”

“Yeah, this situation will only be temporary!”

“If the one who’s neutralizing your power stops...”

“Or if you get far enough away, you’ll be able to enjoy this like a game again!”

“See you!”

With that, Malna and Rilna vanished. Youko remained on her knees in shock. She had no idea how to deal with the information that had just been dumped on her.

But as she sat there, dumbfounded, something changed. Her body transformed back into a thin but muscular male form. As if everything before had just been an illusion, she felt power surge through her body once again. With a small gesture, the system window appeared in her vision. Her powers were back.

“Dammit! What the hell was that?!”

Having her power back didn’t mean that she could relax. Someone had the ability to nullify her skills, and they were on this ship. Had they gone somewhere else or just turned their own power off? She couldn’t feel safe until she knew the answer.

“First, I guess I should call my allies.”

Using the system, she summoned the three maids who had been waiting in her room. They appeared instantly. She could call them to her side no matter where they were.

“You know how to fight, right?”

“Well, yes, we are Battle Maids,” one of them responded.

If their powers were nullified, at least their raw combat skills would be

useful. Youko had formally hired them, so even if her abilities were being blocked, they should still have been willing to fight for her.

But I don't know if they'll uphold their contract if they see my original form.

"Okay, search the inside of the ship and eliminate the user of that power." The hero was now of secondary concern.

"Who would that be?"

"I don't know. Kill anyone who seems like they might be responsible. My form might change because of their power, but don't worry about it. If you kill them, I'll go back to normal."

"Understood."

Youko left the room with the three maids in tow. Things outside seemed pretty noisy. A plump man ran fearfully past. Youko activated the Tactical Support System and used the Ice Needle spell. The man vanished in a flash of light, his expensive clothing all that was left behind.

For some reason, the way the man had been running had bothered her. She didn't feel any regret or guilt over his demise. In her mind, this world *was* a game. Her mind wouldn't be able to handle it if she thought otherwise.

"That's how it was supposed to be from the start. Kill everyone we meet!" Youko figured if they killed everyone on board, eventually the user of the troublesome power would be gone.

"Understood!" her maids replied, full of energy. "Ah, there's someone now!"

A boy appeared from around the corner. Youko's loyal maids dashed forward to carry out their master's orders before suddenly falling to the ground and lying quite still.

"Hey, what are you guys doing?" She didn't understand how they had tripped and fallen in a place with no obstacles.

"Oh, it's you. I figured you'd end up doing something like this," the boy commented.

Youko remembered speaking to him briefly before boarding the ship, but such a fleeting connection wasn't enough for her to consider sparing him. She had already decided to kill everyone there, so she would dispatch him right away.

She activated the Tactical Support System.

Chapter 20 — You Should Help Them! As a Human!

Yogiri felt like things had gotten bad. He had considered a number of possible risks that taking a ship might entail, and those risks had all occurred exactly as he'd imagined.

The ship hadn't sunk yet, but being stuck in the middle of the open ocean was still plenty dangerous. If they didn't get moving again, they'd be in trouble. No matter how much food they had stocked up, they would eventually face starvation. He would probably have been fine on his own, but if he wanted to keep Tomochika safe as well, he would need to resolve the situation and get the journey back on track.

As Yogiri considered the situation, he continued at his usual unhurried pace through the ship. If he ran, he would only exhaust himself, so it wouldn't reunite him with Tomochika any faster.

"This is a kraken, I guess? I don't feel any killing intent. If pirates are coming from it, I guess it's some form of transportation?"

He could see the enormous tentacles through the windows. It looked alive, but once the possibility of it being artificial was in his mind, he could see that too.

Each of the tentacles had grown a set of stairs, allowing for multiple parts of the ship to be captured at once. He was still in contact with Tomochika and Mokomoko, so he knew what was going on there as well. If the pirates' objective was to collect the ransom, then Tomochika would be safe for the moment.

Yogiri headed for the elevator. He was on the tenth floor of the ship's living quarters. He felt that walking all the way down would be too much effort, but the elevator wasn't working. The pirates must have already disabled it.

"Man, what a pain."

Looking at a map of the ship close to the elevator, he found a staircase

nearby. There weren't many on the ship, so it looked like he'd have to use the emergency stairs.

Walking through the halls, he opened the door leading to one stairwell but quickly found he could only make it three floors down that way. The walls had buckled, destroying the lower sections. It must have been damaged by the tentacles.

"I guess they aren't taking that much care with the boat..."

If this staircase was no good, he'd need to find another one. With a sigh, he began walking through the halls yet again.

He was currently on the seventh floor, so it should have been made up of first-class cabins. The atmosphere was chaotic. Everyone was in a panic over the giant sea creature's attack. Some were sticking their heads out to see what was going on while others were running down the halls.

Yogiri headed for the next staircase. Turning a corner, he found a pile of clothes lying in the middle of the hallway. They had likely belonged to the man he'd just seen running by. While he thought about how odd it was for the guy to have stripped off his clothes as he ran, a group of three maids suddenly charged at him. He killed them before they could get close. They had swords in their hands and had been emitting a clear killing intent.

"What are you guys doing?"

A short distance from the now-dead maids stood a man. With a face so well-sculpted that it seemed artificial, he looked down on the fallen maids, half confused and half exasperated.

"Oh, it's you," Yogiri said. "I figured you'd end up doing something like this."

It was Yousuke Hiiragi, the guy who had thought this world was a game. Yogiri had known to keep an eye on him, and it seemed like he was planning to take advantage of the confusion to accomplish some personal objective.

A moment later, Yousuke too was on the floor. He had directed killing intent at Yogiri, so Yogiri had reflexively used his power.

"Were you related to the pirates somehow?" Yogiri wondered.

He only remembered speaking with the guy briefly at the port, so he didn't feel like Yousuke should have held any animosity towards him. It was possible he had boarded the ship to guide the pirates to it, but now they would never know. Thinking about it was pointless, so he once again set off in search of stairs.

After walking for a while, he heard a scream. It was coming from behind the door that led to the staircase he was going towards.

"I've got a bad feeling about this..."

He might have been better off finding another route to avoid getting caught up in further trouble, but he didn't have time to keep taking different paths. Mentally readying himself, he opened the door and stepped inside.

"H-Help!"

Yogiri looked down to see a number of people sprawled across the landing below him. He couldn't tell if most of them were alive or not, but there were two among them who definitely were. One was a well-built gentleman, reaching desperately towards him, and the other was a woman grabbing the man's hair.

As Yogiri wondered whether he should do something, he lost his chance, the life quickly draining from the gentleman's face. His skin turned dark as earth, drying out completely. It was hard to believe he was anything but dead.

The woman let go of his hair and stood up, looking at Yogiri. Although her eyes seemed vacant, she was clearly aware of him.

Yogiri felt killing intent coming from her, so he promptly used his power. The woman tried to jump towards him but instead tripped over herself and fell.

She wasn't dead, though. It wasn't that Yogiri had gone easy on her, but the source of the killing intent had been something inside of her, not the woman herself.

"That was pretty small. Was it some sort of parasite?"

When Yogiri used his power, he could get a general impression of what he had killed. This time it had been something tiny inside the woman's head. It must have been controlling her. He had heard of some parasites being able to control their hosts like that.

"Are you okay?" Yogiri asked, crouching down by the fallen woman. She was alive but unconscious.

He was a little worried, but he didn't have the time to wait around for her to wake up. He decided to hurry on.

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"You should have helped her! As a human!"

Tomochika was with the other hostages who were gathered in the lounge. Except for the pirates blocking the two exits, they were free to do as they liked inside. So even as she secretly contacted Yogiri, they made no move to stop her. From the outside, it just looked like she was talking to Enju, who was still being controlled by Mokomoko.

That's easy for you to say, but she did attack me, so I didn't feel like I had to do much.

"That's the kind of thing you need to do if you want to be popular, you know?"

"There's no way you'll ever become a harem king with that attitude," Mokomoko added.

"Not that he said he wanted to be one!"

Anyway, there's been a whole bunch of people like that popping up. I can't take care of them all.

"'A whole bunch'?"

"Yeah. They're being controlled by something and attacking everyone around them. When I try to walk by, they attack me too."

"That sounds different from the pirates, doesn't it?"

The pirates had yet to harm any of the passengers and had said their objective was ransom money. It wouldn't make sense for them to be hurting their prisoners.

The ones coming at me looked like rich passengers. I can't see them as pirates.

Tomochika studied the thugs in the room. They were all dressed very differently from each other, with no unifying characteristics, but they each had a dangerous air. At the very least, they were far different from the passengers of the luxurious cruise ship, so there was no way one would be mistaken for the other.

"So, there's something here besides the pirates?"

Probably best to assume that.

"But we can't get out of here, so I feel like it has nothing to do with us..."

Thinking about the other passengers, Tomochika had decided against trying to force her way out. Instead of their original plan, she had chosen to wait for Yogiri to arrive. Once he rejoined them, he would be able to deal with the pirates without bringing any harm to the passengers.

"I guess we're free enough while they've got us in here, but I kind of want

to change out of my swimsuit...”

She had been getting all sorts of looks at the pool, but they’d been somewhat shy and sporadic. The blunt stares of the pirates, however, naturally made her feel uncomfortable.

As she was thinking about what she could put on over the swimsuit, someone entered the lounge. It was an older man wearing glasses. Apparently, he was a friend of the pirates, as the ones blocking the exits let him through without a word.

“Now then. We’ve explained our objective is to ransom you,” the knight who had first boarded the ship announced. “In order to do that, we need to properly appraise your value.”

Huh? What happened to that guard lady? Tomochika wondered.

Degul was nowhere to be seen. She hadn’t accompanied them when her crew had locked the passengers in the lounge. The pirates had called her “boss,” though, so she was likely their leader, and she had clearly infiltrated the ship’s staff and drawn the pirates there herself.

“This man will carry out the inspection. He is well-informed in regards to all noble and royal lines as well as those of particular wealth, and has a good grasp of the current political situation, so please take it easy,” the knight said, introducing the older man.

“How is that reassuring?” Tomochika muttered as the newcomer began walking around the lounge with his retinue, inspecting each passenger individually.

Eventually, he reached Tomochika and Mokomoko.

“Hmm...there is no record of you in my directory. There’s no one to demand a ransom from, so I suppose you’re worthless!”

Tomochika felt conflicted. It wasn’t like she was hoping for a great evaluation from a pirate, but she wasn’t too pleased about being called worthless either.

“What do we do with her, then?”

“The boss said to kill all combatants. That rule is absolute.”

“But she’s a passenger. And to the boss, she’s worthless.”

“So basically, the boss won’t care what happens to her, right? Or about what we do to her.”

The speaker gave Tomochika a vulgar look. It was the man who had killed the mercenary girls by the pool.

“Umm, didn’t she say you guys had no time to deal with women who aren’t worth any money?” asked Tomochika.

“Don’t sweat it, girl. Look around. We’re here with nothin’ to do. We’ve got all the time in the world!”

“You can’t just interpret what she said however you like!”

As she yelled that, Tomochika struck the man’s jaw, heart, and crotch simultaneously. It was the fastest close-quarters technique of the Dannoura style: the Triple Checkmate. It struck three vital points along the central axis of her opponent’s body in rapid succession, giving them no chance to counterattack. She had taken him down before he could even draw his weapon.

She who strikes first wins, after all.

Chapter 21 — Can You Not Just Self-Destruct, Then?!

Ever since her seal had been removed, Tomochika was able to smoothly transition into fighting without any hesitation or warning. The Dannoura family had spent its long history refining not only the body but also the mind for battle.

Her opponent was struck down in a single blow while casually conversing. That was possible for someone with the Dannoura spirit. On every battlefield there were those with the bare minimum of skill who would brag about being capable of such a feat, but the number of those truly capable of it was small. Not only would the person's opponent be unable to predict that they would be struck while they were speaking, they would be taken down without so much as a chance of offering resistance.

The cutlass-wielding pirate likely hadn't even realized he had been attacked. The strike to his jaw rattled his brain, and the strike to his chest disrupted his heartbeat. Accomplishing such things wasn't merely a matter of striking hard enough—applying a precise amount of force, something the Dannoura were thoroughly trained in, was key.

That alone was enough to knock her target unconscious, but Tomochika had supplemented it with a third strike to the groin for insurance. No matter who her opponent was, the Dannoura techniques sought to inflict maximum damage.

As the pirate collapsed, Tomochika was already choosing her next target. There were two nearby: the older man wearing glasses and another rough-looking man in leather armor.

Tomochika lightly shoved the sagging pirate into the leather-armored man. As the first man tumbled into the second, the leather warrior grabbed him with both hands to hold him up. At the same time, Tomochika spun around behind him, striking him in the back of the head. The two collapsed in a tangled heap, but for good measure, she followed up with a stomp to the

leathered man's face.

The older man seemed unaccustomed to combat, as he appeared incapable of reacting to Tomochika's sudden use of violence. As he opened his mouth to scream, she delivered a swift chop to his throat. He immediately passed out and fell to the floor.

Once the battle had begun, there was no room for mercy. Most martial arts taught that much, and the Dannoura School was no different.

"Hm. I suppose we have no choice but to bulldoze our way through now," Mokomoko commented.

"Can't you fight, Mokomoko?!" Tomochika asked. With two of them, their combat advantage would greatly improve, making it much easier to escape.

"Unfortunately not. I am moving this body with something like remote controls. I am not able to fight properly in this state."

"Can you not just self-destruct, then?!"

Since she had cut off the man's voice before he could cry out, they had some time before anyone noticed.

They were currently standing in the middle of the lounge. There was an exit on either side. Tomochika threw a nearby chair towards the front exit, immediately turning and running for the rear. At the moment, everyone's Gifts were neutralized, so she didn't think she'd have to worry about any sort of magic attack. The chair she had thrown would block the line of sight for other projectiles that might be heading her way.

The back exit was being guarded by two pirates. As she ran, Tomochika threw whatever was close at hand, from cups and ashtrays to chairs and tables. The ability to assess an object's center of gravity at a touch and immediately use it as a throwing weapon was the core of the Dannoura School of Archery's techniques.

Reaching the exit at the same time as a falling table, Tomochika delivered a knee to the head of one of the guards who was already crouched down, and he covered his face in pain. Her momentum carried her through the door and out into the hallway.

"This way!"

Looking for the source of the voice, she saw a familiar face. It was Hornet, the hero she had met at the port. It seemed he was planning on rescuing her, but Tomochika ran in the opposite direction. Maybe he was just

trying to be nice, but something felt off. He was different from the last time she had seen him. She couldn't help but remember Yogiri mentioning that people on the ship were being controlled by something. In short, she couldn't trust him, so she decided not to get close.

"Hm. It looks like you're not so great at making yourself attractive either," Mokomoko commented as she ran alongside her. "Shouldn't you have flung yourself into the handsome man's arms, begging to be saved?"

"Do you really think that's what I should have done?"

"Not at all!"

"Then shut up!"

I made it to the first floor of the living quarters, came Yogiri's voice through the communicator.

"We're heading your way!" Tomochika called out as they sprinted through the ship.

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A few minutes earlier...

Immediately after Izelda had drained Hornet's mother of her magical energy, he had searched for the man who had fled but had been unable to find him.

"Hmm. He shouldn't have been able to get that far."

The stranger's abilities had been incredibly varied. It would be natural for him to have some sort of stealth technique. Izelda wouldn't allow him to escape, but there was a limit to what he could do in his current state. He wanted to get some results before the boy's body gave out.

He decided to use the insects. The bugs he had created out of his left arm earlier were essentially a part of him. He had since regenerated that arm, but the insects remained. He just had to send them out through the ship and he could use them to search the area. If they came across anyone, they could take control of those people.

Izelda's descendants were many, so it was likely there were others on this ship. As part of him, the insects could activate his essence within any of those descendants and cause them to act as he wished, to a degree. Izelda had vessels throughout the world. They existed both as part of his pursuit of power and as insurance in case the worst were to happen. Even if his primary

body at any given time was to perish, another would “activate” somewhere to carry out his goals. In a way, he was immortal.

Even so, he wasn’t satisfied with sitting around and waiting for his current form to die. He began collecting magical energy from his other activated bodies. With more magical energy, he could extend the lifespan of his current vessel. Once activated, the others wouldn’t be capable of complex thought right away, so he instructed them to attack anyone they found indiscriminately and steal their magical energy. That was something they could do without needing to think about it.

Glancing out the window, he saw tentacles wrapped around the ship. He’d felt the boat shaking right before his fight with the mysterious man, so it seemed that was the cause.

“Oh? I remember this ancient relic.”

While Izelda was, in some respects, an ancient ghost himself, back when he was truly still alive, there had been a number of relics that were already considered “ancient” at the time. He had come across an interesting artifact while researching magic but had been unable to get the device working. Apparently, someone had managed to awaken it in the years since.

Izelda searched for the presence of others. He couldn’t find the man from earlier, but he was able to detect everyone else without a problem.

Stairs extended from the relic’s tentacles, from which people began to descend before taking control of the ship. The hired mercenaries had been utterly useless. The Gift was failing to function, so those who relied on it were helpless in the face of the invaders.

“How could this be so convenient?”

Izelda’s interest was piqued. An ancient relic, a man with a mysterious Gift, and now someone who could neutralize that Gift. Each was enough to catch his interest, and yet they had all appeared at the same time. It almost made him think things were going too well, but during his long life, Izelda had experienced coincidence layered on coincidence many times. None of this was enough to arouse his suspicions.

Izelda once again considered his priorities. He put the search for the mysterious man aside for later, turning his attention to the guaranteed chance of contact with the ancient relic and searching for the person who was currently nullifying the Gift.

Pirates had confined the passengers to a number of areas, and a few of

them were standing guard. A group was heading for the pilothouse, and the one with the nullifying power was likely with them. Izelda made his way out of the room through the window. Before the Gift had overtaken this world, he had been a famous High Wizard. Even without the Gift, flight was child's play to him. The nullifying ability had some effect on powers beyond those of the Gift, but it was weak enough that he could ignore it.

Flying through the air, he entered the ship's pilothouse. A woman clad in men's clothes was threatening someone—presumably the captain—with a sword. She was recorded in Hornet's memory as the casino guard, Degul. She must have infiltrated the ship to investigate it from the inside before leading the pirates straight to them.

"Just as I thought," Izelda mused. "You look somewhat familiar. You belong to the royal family of Manii, don't you?"

The Kingdom of Manii's royal bloodline possessed a nullifying power. They had used it to suppress the Underworld beneath their kingdom, preventing the monsters inhabiting it from reaching the surface. The intensity of that power varied from individual to individual, but this woman seemed to possess it at great strength. It was capable of encompassing the entire ship and completely canceled out the abilities of everyone on board.

"With that much power, I would have expected the crown to fall at your feet whether you liked it or not. Why are you out here, playing pirate?"

"Who the hell are you?" Degul turned to glare at Izelda. Her power grew even stronger, dispersing the faint magical energy that was leaking out of him. It wasn't enough to inhibit his true power, but it was still a considerable feat. It might well have been the strongest such power he had ever encountered.

"This is incredible. I will very much need to research it."

The Kingdom of Manii was High Wizard Eglacia's territory, so Izelda didn't meddle with them. But if Degul was out here acting as a pirate, there would be no problem with striking her down or capturing her for studying...or forcing her to bear children for him.

"What does the kingdom have to do with it? Did that bastard send you?" Degul turned her sword from the captain to Izelda.

"Hm. Your strength is great but not enough to fight me."

Degul suddenly slumped to the ground. The insects had infiltrated her body and paralyzed her.

“Oh. Perhaps I went too far.”

The royal had passed out. Maybe he hadn’t adjusted the strength of the insects quite right. But she wasn’t dead, so she would likely wake up sooner or later.

“Now then, I have acquired Manii’s bloodline, so mastery of the ancient relic should be no problem with her under my control. All that’s left is that man... No, before that, perhaps I should secure the other woman with the interesting body.”

He had no idea what was being done to the passengers where the girl was being held. Objectively, she possessed a body that would attract the attention of the men around her. It was possible it would stir up a sadistic streak in the pirates, and they might go too far and kill her after assaulting her. Izelda needed her to produce children, so he couldn’t allow her to die.

He headed for the lounge where she was being held.

Chapter 22 — You Really Can't Do Anything Heroine-Like

"Hm. I guess I should stick with what I'm used to."

Izelda's expectations were immediately squashed. Hornet possessed a natural ability to attract women. Izelda had thought that just extending a hand towards her would be enough to draw her in, but it seemed it wouldn't be that easy.

Of course, he could have restrained her with magic instead of using such a roundabout approach, but he was trying to conserve as much magical energy as possible. If he were to exhaust his supply, his current body would disintegrate. He needed to be careful about when he chose to exercise his abilities.

If he used the Gift, he could safely restrain her with a minimal expenditure of energy, but it appeared the woman from the royal bloodline had awakened, as her nullifying power was once again active. And unfortunately, this girl was too far away for him to use the insects on her. Since she had fled upon seeing him, he hadn't had time to catch her with the parasites. Additionally, he wanted to avoid injuring her body, if possible. He wanted her physical form to be in the most natural condition possible when he captured her.

"Who the hell are you?!"

Men burst out of the lounge, likely pursuing the girl. Izelda casually cut them down with the sword in his hand. With the Gift being suppressed, it was a contest of pure skill. Currently inhabiting the body of the hero Hornet, even if the boy's personality had been extinguished, the swordsmanship skills of its former inhabitant had been thoroughly ingrained in the body. No matter how capable they were, he could cut down two pirates like they were nothing.

But that led to Izelda letting down his guard. Unable to dodge properly, one blade bit deep into his armpit as the knight leaped out of the lounge towards him. It wasn't a fatal wound, but it would require a wasteful expenditure of magical energy to repair.

“I see. Since your strategy revolves around nullifying the Gift, I suppose it is a given that you would have those who excel in combat with you.”

“We were well prepared for the presence of a hero on board,” the knight replied. “You have no advantage over us.”

They must have taken stock of the defensive abilities of the ship before they attacked it. They were assured of their victory.

“Hm. He was about the Royal Blade rank, or perhaps Bestial Blade. If he reached that rank before the inflation caused by system skills, this situation would be more than manageable.”

Swordsmen were divided into ranks, with Swordmaster being the highest. Those of higher rank were able to use special techniques that transcended swordsmanship, but that was all thanks to the Gift. In a battle using only a sword, it was quite possible for a lower-ranking swordsman to end up being the superior fighter. As Izelda’s swordsmanship abilities were only the remaining vestiges of Hornet’s skills, he would be at a disadvantage against a true master.

He knew he might need to use magic to get out of his current situation, but there was something he wanted to try first.

“Hey! Don’t move!”

A woman’s voice suddenly rang out through the ship. Degul was broadcasting from the pilothouse. In response, the knight froze for a moment, which was more than enough for Izelda to step in and sever his head.

“Damn you! What did you do to me?!” Degul cried.

“I just took control of your body a bit. Don’t worry, I have done nothing to infringe on your mind.”

His voice couldn’t reach the pilothouse, of course, but he had used the insects inside the pirate to hijack her nervous system and control her body. It was incredibly delicate, exhausting work, but now he only needed to use magical energy to transmit instructions.

“I have really been driven into a corner with all this resource management.” Izelda had never intended to take control of Hornet’s body, so he hadn’t made any preparations for it.

As he continued to grumble, five passengers arrived. They were distant descendants of his and therefore capable of being used as vessels. His essence within them had been activated, but they hadn’t become self-aware, so they were merely following the instructions of the insects.

“That’s it? I expected more.”

In order to acquire more underlings, he opened a gate to the spirit world. Ghosts poured out and began possessing dead bodies, which he then set about using to attack others.

Unfortunately, without proper guidance, it was likely they would end up attacking the very targets he was searching for, so he bound the summoned spirits with a contract to limit their actions, requiring them to refrain from attacking the ones he was searching for and report back immediately if they found them.

Spirits of the dead watched vigilantly for any opportunity to make it into the world of the living. Once there, they would gladly go after everyone around them to increase their own ranks. This meant Izelda only needed to use enough magical energy to open the gate. It was the perfect solution for him, as he was still trying to conserve energy.

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“You’re so slow! Wait, were you even running?!”

Sitting at the bottom of the grand staircase, Tomochika saw Yogiri stroll into view.

“I mean...I was hurrying.”

He was breathing fairly hard as he approached her. Maybe he had been trying his best, so she decided not to press him.

“A swimsuit, huh?” he commented. “Looks good.”

“Oh, of course you would say that! I called it!” Just as she had predicted, Yogiri showed no restraint once he saw her in a swimsuit. “Can you please not stare at me like that?!”

“But the whole point is to show off, right? If it was underwear, it would be different.”

Tomochika was used to getting looks from others, but they were normally restrained, fleeting glances. Having someone standing right in front of her, shamelessly staring at her body, still felt embarrassing.

“So, what now? Where do things stand?” he asked.

Once Yogiri had taken a seat beside her, Tomochika summed up what she knew.

“Hm. To summarize, it appears there are currently two incidents

occurring," Mokomoko added afterwards. "One issue is the pirates. The other is that the passengers are being controlled, like the ones you met on the way here."

"Fighting them won't accomplish much. Is there a way we can escape?" Tomochika asked.

"You really can't do anything heroine-like, can you?" Mokomoko cried. "Will you not make some appeal to try and convince him to save the rest of the passengers, to show off your kind and loving spirit?"

"And what if I did?"

"Of course I would tell you it's impossible."

"Then don't bring it up!"

"Regardless, fleeing in this situation would be rather challenging. It appears the lifeboats have all been lost to the sea."

On their way through the ship, Tomochika and Mokomoko had looked around and found that all the lifeboats were gone. That was likely the work of the pirates. If they wanted to hold the passengers hostage, it was sensible for them to remove any means of escape.

"Can you make a boat from Furemaru?" Yogiri asked.

It was one of their plans from earlier. Mokomoko had claimed they could make a boat large enough for the three of them.

"The nullifying power was turned off for a little while earlier, but now it's back, so I can't."

"But in the capital, you were able to use it anyway, right?" asked Tomochika.

"In the capital, the seal was thin and spread across a wide area. Plus it served only to reduce the power ranks. But the ability being used here is focused on a much smaller space and exhibiting a far more powerful effect."

"You said it's a small area, but this ship is pretty big..."

"Yeah. What if we jumped in the water and swam out of range?" Yogiri asked.

"Are you that good at swimming, Takatou? An inexperienced swimmer would probably drown if they just jumped into the ocean." Tomochika figured with Yogiri's level of fitness, he wouldn't have a chance.

"The Dannoura Swimming Method could be used to swim while supporting another person, but that would mean abandoning Enju. This body is rather heavy."

“Oh, so our weird way of swimming has an official title...”

“Basically, sorting out the situation here will be easier than running away,” Yogiri decided.

“Hm. The sealing power and the kraken are both associated with the pirates. Dealing with their leader should be the quickest method,” Mokomoko said.

Having finally caught his breath, Yogiri stood up. “Where would they be?”

“We can capture one of the pirates and find out from them. Tomochika, I’ll leave that to you.”

“Why?!”

“I am still only moving by remote control. It almost feels like playing an old Resident Evil game.”

“And my abilities aren’t really good for torture,” Yogiri added.

“How does a ghost from the Heian era know anything about video games?” Tomochika stood up and began walking. “I don’t know how I feel about being in the front like this!”

They were walking with Tomochika in the lead, then Mokomoko, and Yogiri in the back. While that was the most effective order for them to be in, given their skills, Tomochika would have preferred being treated a bit more like a girl.

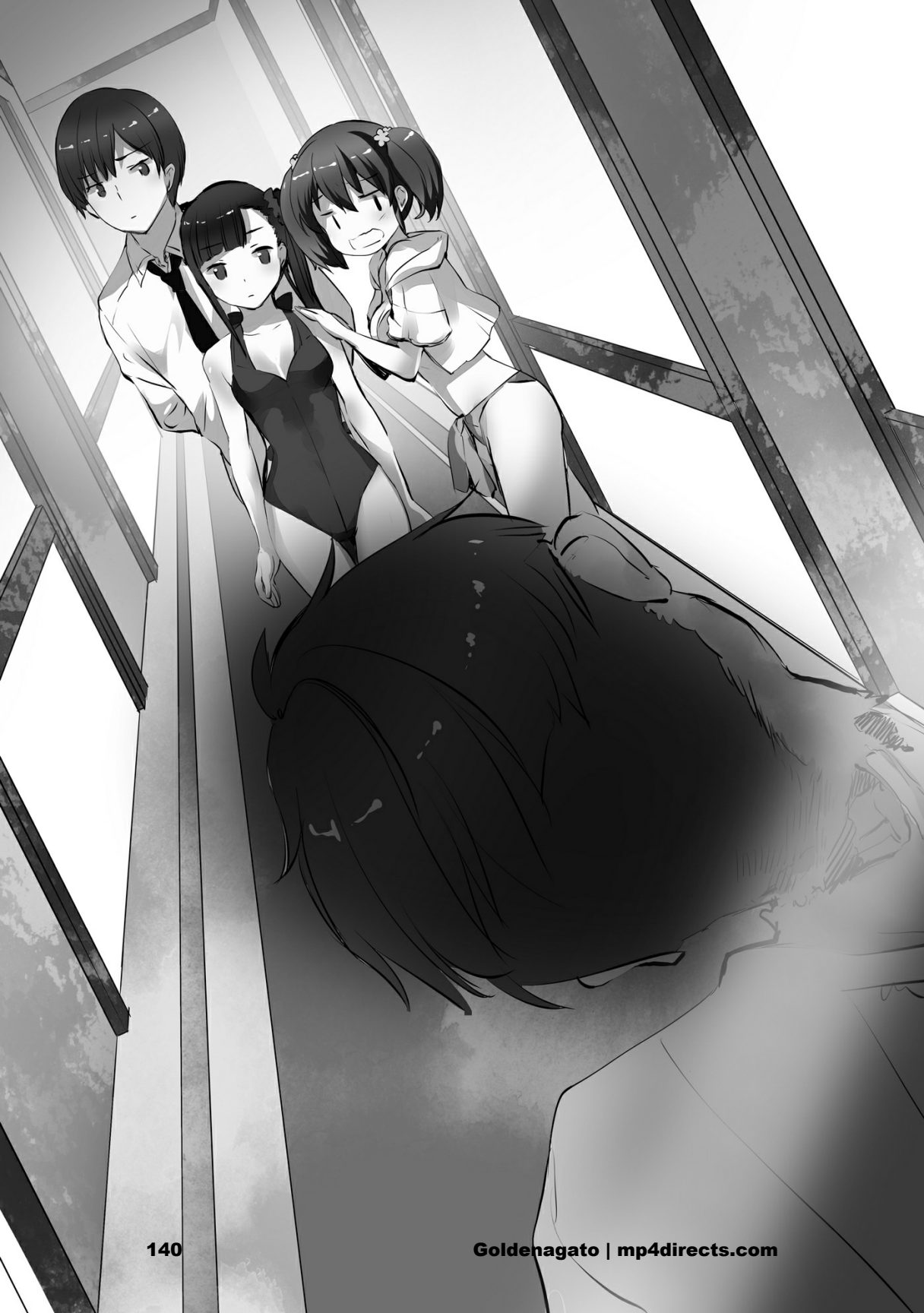
There was no sign of anyone in the halls. The pirates had rounded up the passengers, so they were likely congregated in places where they could easily hold a lot of people.

“I can just beat up any pirates we find, right?”

“You sound awfully unhappy about it.”

“Of course I do! Oh, there’s one!” As they rounded a corner, they saw a man who looked every bit the stereotypical pirate. “All right, what’s around that I can throw at... Huh?”

The man’s neck was bent at an odd angle, his head sitting horizontally on his shoulders. She figured his neck had been broken.



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“Doesn’t that look...wrong?”

“It appears a deceased spirit has possessed the body.”

“Oh, so it’s like you, Mokomoko.”

“Don’t associate me with that thing!”

“Well, what is it?!”

“It appears to be a zombie or something similar.”

“Could our remote-controlled friend do something about it?”

“If I only had an infinite rocket launcher...”

As they spoke, the pirate corpse remained still.

“So? I don’t know what to do if it’s just going to stand there...”

“...FOUND...YOU...” the zombie said in a chilling voice. And then, as if its lack of movement up until then had been a ploy, it suddenly leaped towards them.

Tomochika immediately prepared to defend herself, but she wasn’t the target. Passing right by her, it lunged at Yogiri.

“Die.”

The corpse stumbled over its own feet, and Yogiri casually stepped around it as it fell. He didn’t have much stamina, but her companion could handle small, precise movements like that without a problem.

“It targeted me, huh?”

“Hm. Its choice seems rather unnatural.”

“Why are you two so relaxed?!”

As Yogiri and Mokomoko were discussing the pirate’s actions, people began gathering around them. On either side of the hallway, invaders, passengers, and crew gathered. They were all corpses, controlled by spirits of the dead, with hollow eyes and unnerving smiles on their faces.

“This seems familiar...”

Tomochika recalled their stay in Hanabusa, where they had been attacked by the undead of the Immortal Corps.

“Die.”

With that, the spirits were wiped out.

“And that was familiar too!”

The end result was always the same.

Chapter 23 — We Committed All Sorts of Barbaric Acts, So Hearing You Say That Hurts

All of the zombies had dropped to the floor.

"Just in case, I will inform you that these were merely dead bodies being moved around. It doesn't seem like the boy minds either way, though," Mokomoko announced.

But it did serve to soften Tomochika's feeling of guilt. The fact that there were so many dead was still a tragedy, but it wasn't like Yogiri had killed a group of passengers who were simply being manipulated.

"Are these the people you were talking about being controlled, Takatou?"

"I don't know. They never really gave the impression of being dead bodies that were moving around before."

"Maybe we shouldn't be looking around for pirates right now."

"Hm. It's not like we have many other choices. Actually, maybe we should just head to the pilothouse. There was a strange broadcast earlier. I believe it was from the head of the pirates."

There was no guarantee that would be the case or that the broadcast had come from the pilothouse. But it was better to have a concrete plan than to walk around checking rooms at random.

While en route to the pilothouse, they were attacked by a number of spirits, but Yogiri of course dealt with them effortlessly.

"Are these guys stupid or something?!" Tomochika commented. "They're not learning at all."

"They possess only a craving for and jealousy of the living," Mokomoko explained. "As spirits, they don't have much of an ability to think for themselves."

"That makes me wonder about you, Mokomoko."

"I have ascended to the rank of Divine Spirit. I have no issues with

retaining memories and performing calculations."

After walking for a while, they reached the pilothouse at the center of the ship. Inside was a woman dressed in men's clothes, lying on the ground faceup. No one else was around, so it seemed like the crew had fled.

"That's her—the pirate leader."

She was the one the intruders had referred to as "boss," so there was no question about it.

"This is the one you played cards against, right?"

"Yeah. Her name is Degul, I think. I guess she's one of them."

"Looks like she's awake."

As Yogiri crouched down and stared into her face, she glared back at him. But she seemed to be paralyzed; she didn't move from where she was lying on the ground.

"What the hell do you want?"

"Do you remember us?"

"Yeah, the cheaters. I hadn't seen someone so obvious about it in a while, so I remember you well."

"This situation is a bit of a problem for us. I'd appreciate it if you left and let the ship move on."

"Ha. What do you imagine I can do in this state?"

"Do you know what's wrong with her, Mokomoko?"

At Yogiri's urging, the Dannoura ghost moved Enju forward to inspect Degul's body. "Hm. The most I can tell is that she has no external injuries. Did something happen to you?"

"No idea. Some weird kid showed up, and then I was suddenly like this. I can't move, but a bit earlier my body was moving and speaking on its own."

Degul was surprisingly honest with them. She had likely realized there was no point in resisting when she was unable to do anything.

"Maybe she was being controlled. She could have those parasites in her as well."

"What are you talking about? That sounds gross," Degul replied.

"When I killed the parasites in other people, they were freed."

"Can you kill them in me?"

"I don't know. They're not trying to hurt me personally, so I can't say for sure."

"Do it, please. If I can move again, I'll gladly sound the retreat."

“One more thing. Could you release the block on our powers?”

Degul thought it over for a moment, then nodded.

“All right, I’m going to kill the thing in your head. There might be side effects.”

“I don’t care. I can’t live like this anyway.”

“Okay, then I’ll try.”

Yogiri put a hand to her forehead, holding it there for a moment before pulling it back.

“That seemed pretty easy.”

“I tried treating it like a virus.”

Yogiri instinctively killed things like viruses when they got close to him, whether they intended harm or not, since they were dangerous just by existing. He had approached the things inside Degul in the same way.

“So, what, is your power a disinfectant now?”

As Tomochika sighed, Degul began to twitch. She slowly lifted her upper body, stretched briefly, then rose to her feet. It appeared that Yogiri’s improvised method had worked perfectly.

“Just so you know, if you turn on us, I’ll kill you,” Yogiri warned her as she picked up her sword.

“I’m not gonna do that. Even we pirates have morals. I’ll retreat, just like I said.”

“Then that means the ship will be back to normal...except not!” Tomochika exclaimed. “With no crew here, how will we get where we need to go?!”

“What do you mean?” Degul asked.

Yogiri gave her a brief rundown of recent events.

“Are you serious? What is with this ship? This wasn’t part of the plan!”

“Mokomoko, can you control the boat?”

“If it was about the size of a cruiser, perhaps I could manage it, but piloting a vessel like this single-handedly is impossible.”

“Then we’re stuck!”

“That’s why I had her release the seal. You should be able to make a boat with Furemaru now, right?”

“Hey, why don’t we just get on those tentacle things and have them take us somewhere safe?” Tomochika asked.

“They’re pirates, you know? That means they’re criminals. I don’t want to

travel with them."

"Are you serious?!"

"Sure, I kill people and steal things depending on the situation, but that's different from throwing in with professional pirates."

"I guess that makes sense..." Tomochika had initially thought it might be a good idea, but maybe she had just become numb to such things.

"Back when I was alive, we committed all sorts of barbaric acts, so hearing you say that hurts a bit..." Mokomoko muttered.

"Wait, are you saying my ancestors—"

"You can be depressed later," Yogiri interrupted. "For now, let's move somewhere else. There's only one hallway leading to this room. If something shows up to block us, there'll be no way out except to go through them."

They decided to hurry and get out before that happened, but they were just a little too late.

"That's him. The guy who did something to me," Degul growled.

A group of people were standing in the hallway in front of them. In the middle of the crowd was the boy who had called out to Tomochika earlier: Hornet.

Chapter 24 — This Is the Hardest Person to Understand Yet

Izelda's haphazard plan was coming together well. The spirits of the dead were killing everyone they came across and possessing their bodies, expanding the reach of his search. It wouldn't take long for him to find his target.

The gathering of magical energy was progressing. He had to compete with the rampaging dead, but there was still plenty of prey left on board. He used the insects to manipulate his descendants into finding other people, into whom he spread even more of the tiny creatures. This method was continuing to activate more and more hosts. Among them were some who became self-aware, so he left the gathering of magical energy to them.

As he was doing this, the spirits who had found the girl he was searching for returned. Apparently, she was heading for the pilothouse. Izelda decided to follow her there himself.

One of the self-aware vessels sent him a telepathic message. *This is bizarre. The spirits are disappearing.*

Oh? So there is *someone who can fight off the spirits even under these conditions?*

With the Gift being entirely suppressed, most methods that could deal with the spirits should have been cut off.

They are disappearing upon approaching the girl.

A power that doesn't rely on the Gift sounds intriguing. Go investigate the situation.

Understood.

Sending one of the "Izeldas" that were close by, he instructed him to confirm what was happening. He learned that the girl had two companions: a young man and a robot in the shape of a girl. The spirits would move to attack the boy, but once they reached a certain point, they collapsed and disappeared, leaving only lifeless corpses behind.

Is it some kind of purification ability? A clergyman of high virtue might be able to purge evil by his presence alone, with no need for the Gift.

He doesn't appear to be any sort of clergyman, and he doesn't seem to be doing anything in particular to purge them either.

Perhaps I will send a weaker vessel to slip into the crowd of spirits and see what happens.

He tried immediately, but the result was the same. Izelda's vessel was stopped in the same way the spirits had been. But the vessel itself wasn't dead, only the insects controlling it.

What happened?

I do not know. It did not appear that anything was done. They just died.

Go see for yourself.

He sent a self-aware vessel in next. His intention was to figure out what was happening little by little, but instead the magical energy from the boy's location was cut off, so he couldn't figure it out.

Another vessel began to communicate with him. *They just die. I do not understand.*

Again, the one who had approached the boy had fallen. Judging from that, their target was responding to the killing intent itself.

Magic that doesn't rely on the Gift? Interesting.

Should we withdraw? If we continue to pursue the girl, it will make us an enemy of that thing.

What are you talking about?

It attacks in ways that are imperceptible. There is a concern that we will not be able to deal with it.

It does not matter. Even if we are wiped out, the experience will provide valuable data for us.

Perhaps still influenced by its original personality, the newly awakened vessel was failing to understand how little the death of each individual Izelda mattered. The Izeldas who existed here were only a few among countless vessels, each pursuing a separate path to ultimate power. Although the women were valuable research materials, their acquisition was not absolutely necessary. Knowing that people like them existed was sufficient, and that information would be recorded in his collective memory, reemerging in a future version of himself at some point to help open a path to greater strength.

Before long, Izelda had six of his vessels standing in front of the

pilothouse, having met up with others on the way. Just as he arrived, the door to the control room opened and the boy with the mysterious power emerged. After him came the girl with the interesting body, the android in the shape of a girl, and the pirate with the nullifying power. The insects paralyzing her had ceased to function, likely killed by the boy.

"You're the one who was supposed to protect the ship, right?" the boy asked.

Without a word, Izelda sent one of his companions, a well-muscled pirate, after him. The man drew his sword and moved to attack the boy, but the moment he ran forward, he fell onto his face and stopped moving. He was dead, but Izelda had no idea how.

"Interesting."

He was impressed by the existence of such a power. He had thought that even if the other vessels had failed to understand, he might be able to figure it out if he saw it firsthand. He knew that the boy was responsible. If he paid close attention, he should have been able to at least catch a glimpse of his actions, even if it was nothing obvious. But he couldn't pick out anything. The boy wasn't using the Gift, and there was no apparent use of magical energy. Without any warning, the vessel's heart had simply stopped. That's all he could tell. And if he couldn't comprehend the power, there was no way of resisting it.

Izelda was not overconfident in his own abilities. He had no reason to believe that this incredible power wouldn't work on him. He understood fully that the moment it was turned on him, there would be nothing he could do.

"It's not interesting to us," the boy said. "We've been getting attacked repeatedly for a while. Is that your fault?"

"Correct."

"Then that makes this easy. My ability is to kill anything at will. If you're the one in charge, you should understand that, right?"

"Indeed. Truly an intriguing ability. As such, I've decided to make all of you into my research subjects."

"I get the feeling we're not going to get through to him, Takatou."

"What research?" the boy asked.

"Hm. I will confiscate the ancient relic and bring you all back to my home base. There I will mate with the women and produce children. The girl has an interesting body, and the pirate is of royal blood. Adding their traits to my

own will aid me in my research. As for you, I intend to experiment with your power as much as possible. I wish to analyze its source."

"It doesn't look like there's any room for us to agree here."

"I don't think I want you mating with Dannoura."

"I was trying to ignore that part. Could you not bring it back up please?!"

"I'm not going to let you do any of that," the boy continued. "You know you can't beat me, so why are you here?"

"Hmm. If I had to put it into words, it would be 'to play the prelude of despair for you,' I suppose."

That was a bad habit of Izelda's. He wanted to see people's faces twist in despair. He wanted to hear them gasp in pain. He wanted to see them tremble in lamentation, soil themselves in fear. He wanted to experience their grief, their despair, their terror with every sense he had. In short, he was a sadist.

That was what had led him to become a High Wizard in the first place. To make people despair, he needed overwhelming power, and his search for that power had led him to the pinnacle of the path of magic.

"Forget despair. What can you even do here? We just want to leave, so could you get out of our way?"

Of course, as he was now, Izelda couldn't do anything to frighten this boy. But he could give him a vague sense of unease, an omen of fear to come. He could announce the endless despair that was waiting for him.

"Everyone here is me. Izelda."

A young man, a little girl, a pirate, an old woman, a middle-aged man... Though they were all different ages and genders, they all possessed his consciousness.

"I exist all over the world."

"I have spread myself across this world for over a thousand years."

"Even if I am killed by you here, it is no problem for me."

"I will remember your face."

"Your scent, the resonance of your spirit."

"You cannot run."

"No matter how strong you are..."

"If we come at you twenty-four hours a day, from all over the world..."

"Will you be able to stand against us?"

"Do you not believe me?"

"That is okay."

“You will understand soon enough.”

Such an explanation might have seemed reckless, but someday the boy would understand. He would understand that this was the day his terror had begun.

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“I don’t know about this...”

Yogiri was perplexed. This person calling himself Izelda went on and on talking, seemingly quite pleased with himself. Yogiri didn’t like the idea of killing someone when he didn’t even know what they were all about. All the guy had done so far was blabber, so he wasn’t posing them any real threat at the moment.

“I think this is the hardest person to understand yet,” Tomochika remarked.

“It’s a problem. I’d almost prefer it if he just attacked us.”

“But if he stands in our way, our only option is to eliminate him, correct?” Mokomoko asked.

“Fine, I get it. You’re our enemy,” Yogiri decided. The man was clearly hostile and had said that he planned to do them harm. So it was probably best to get rid of him now. “Die.” He killed the young mercenary.

“Oh, I still don’t understand how it works. What even happened there? Could you show me again?”

The small girl was now speaking in a way that didn’t match her appearance at all. Yogiri had wondered if killing the main boy would clear up their brainwashing, but it didn’t seem like that was the case. So he killed them all one by one. They each spoke in the same way, saying the same things.

The last one alive was the old woman. “What an arrogant power. I can’t help but look forward to the day you will bow down before me. Today is the beginning of your hardships!”

“Die.”

With that, everyone blocking their path was gone.

“For some reason, I don’t feel satisfied by that.”

“Hm. It appeared he didn’t fear death.”

“Wait a second, what happened to the pirate?” Yogiri asked.

Degul had been right beside them when they had stepped out into the hallway, but now she was nowhere to be seen. The corridor had been blocked, so she couldn't have gone forward. He peeked back into the pilothouse, but there was no one there either.

"Did she go out through a window?" Tomochika asked after looking back into the room as well. It didn't seem like there were any other options.

"Well, as long as she's leaving, that's fine."

Yogiri wasn't interested in spending time with pirates, so he didn't much mind her mysterious disappearance. Then a strong tremor shook the ship, a loud creaking noise erupting from the hull. Looking out the window, they saw the tentacles releasing the boat. The pirates had begun to pull back, as promised. With the tentacles gone, the ship was free.

Suddenly, it began to tilt.

"Huh? Does that mean..."

"It appears the tentacles were keeping the ship upright. The damage they inflicted when they grabbed it must have been quite severe."

"Oh, yeah, the stairs were destroyed earlier."

"Then..."

"We're probably going to sink."

"After all that, we're just going down with the boat?!"

Tomochika's shout echoed through the halls of the shuddering cruise ship.

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At a place that could be called "Izelda's throne room," a place isolated from reality, a world that only he could reach, the choice vessels the wizard had collected were stored. At present, only his strongest vessels were gathered there.

"Hornet has died. He had such a promising start too."

"Did you think so? Stacking the Hero class with the Imperial Sword class seemed like a waste. Both lean heavily on swordsmanship. Don't you think it would have been better to choose one and then another unrelated power?"

"The Gift's nature is somewhat determined by bloodlines, but chance is still a considerable influence. If we could choose how it would turn out, things would be much easier for us."

"We found someone who belongs to Manii's royal family."

“She seems to be a runaway, so that should be convenient. There will be no need to step on Eglacia’s toes.”

“Surely we have no need to concern ourselves with Eglacia’s feelings at this point?”

“There is no reason to become his enemy. There are plenty of other options available to us.”

“There was also an interesting girl.”

“Her physical abilities were exceedingly refined. It is hard to imagine they occurred naturally.”

“She was likely produced via controlled breeding, much in the way we have been operating.”

“We have been somewhat negligent in our cultivation of physical traits, haven’t we?”

“There is a good chance we can adopt her traits if we can take her in.”

“Indeed. Those physical parameters do become the base values that skills operate on, after all.”

“And what about the boy with the strange powers?”

“We have learned nothing. We will need to continue investigating.”

“Intriguing. I would very much like to determine the source of his power.”

A number of vessels within which Izelda’s consciousness had awakened were currently conversing. Their location was an empty space, meant only for them, and it contained nothing else. Being permanently awake in a space like this would be dull, so they normally just slept. Only when something of particular note happened were they simultaneously activated to discuss the situation.

Fundamentally, all they did was talk. They didn’t normally create plans, nor did they give out orders. For any problems in the real world, they were happy to leave the solutions up to the vessels who lived there. This was no more than a storage area. The only thing that ever changed was the arrival of new vessels, and that wasn’t likely to occur again for some time.

After talking for a while, they decided to return to sleep.

And then eyes appeared.

“What?!”

In this space, where no one but Izelda should have been able to enter, which should have rejected everything from the outside, eyes had begun to open. Lines ran through empty space, opening vertically to reveal them. The

movement was like that of eyelids lifting. They continued to appear one after another, filling the entire space.

“What is going on?”

“How did they get here?”

“You are the boy on the ship...”

It was little more than a hunch, but Izelda felt something of the boy’s atmosphere from them.

“I see. So you have come to kill me.”

“I never expected someone to be able to find this place.”

“But what of it?”

“Did you think this was my core?”

“Killing me here will change nothing.”

“I exist all throughout the world.”

“I do not exist in the shape of a single person alone.”

“There are versions of myself that are so small as to be invisible, like tiny insects.”

“The power that allowed you to reach this place is astounding. I recognize that.”

“But did you think such a thing would be sufficient to annihilate me?”

“No matter how many of me you kill, there will always be more.”

“I am beyond numbering. I am everywhere.”

“No matter how many of me are gone, as long as even one fragment survives, I will continue to multiply.”

“I am already prepared to face great losses.”

The storage area was important, but it was not the foundation of his plan. Even if every vessel stored here was killed, it would not be a problem in the long run. Izelda had constructed a system to multiply and disperse himself all but infinitely, with sufficient redundancy to make himself, for all intents and purposes, immortal.

Izelda reached out with his mind and tried to confirm what was going on out in the real world, but there was no reply. That was odd. He was constantly in a state of mutual observation. In order to deal with the most unlikely of occurrences, a warning should have been sent if anything had happened. But no warning had come. The Izeldas in the real world had just gone silent.

What did that mean? He didn’t understand. The simple answer to that

question was right in front of him, but he couldn't face it.

"What is happening?"

"Even among the humans, there should be more than a million of me..."

"If even a single one of them, one single creature were alive, I would have received an alert."

"Preposterous. The majority of them were normal humans, without my own consciousness having awakened."

Most of the people containing Izelda's essence lived their entire lives without even knowing it. That was both as a precaution against danger and to facilitate the development of diverse characteristics based on different environments. There should have been no way to know that Izelda existed within them, nor any way to check. And even if it was somehow discovered, they were just ordinary humans. No ordinary person would be able to kill someone just because they had the potential to be dangerous. Izelda had that much faith in humanity. He had thought that humanity was, at its core, good.

But this boy was different. However he had found them, however he had accomplished it, every single vessel in the world had been killed. Over one million people, livestock, wild animals, insects, plants, and even miniscule bacteria—everything that had carried his essence was gone.

Izelda began to feel fear. He wasn't afraid of that power. He was afraid that he might actually die. Until that point, he'd had no reason to fear one of his vessels perishing. If it did, its memories would simply be passed to and inherited by another. By spreading those memories to many others, he could grow into any number of people.

But now that redundancy was gone. If he died, it would be over. Everything would disappear. All his efforts and studies would all have been for nothing. For the first time in over a thousand years, he felt the fear of everything ending. Before, death had been a phenomenon that was wholly irrelevant to him. But now it had come for him. An unavoidable end was staring him in the face.

"A-All those people you killed! They were innocent, ordinary people! Do you feel nothing for them?!" That was all he could think to say in his desperation. He hoped to make the boy feel at least a small amount of regret, but the crowd of eyes showed no response. They didn't seem to possess a spirit that could be shaken by such things.

"Please spare me! There should be no reason for you to kill me now!"

“I understand your power! I will never interfere with you again!”

“How long do you think I have struggled to build this up?!”

“If you came all the way here, you must want something from me, right?”

“What is it? Money? Women? I’ll give you everything! I have everything you could want!”

Right until the very end, Izelda never knew what those eyes were thinking.

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The High Wizard had been thoroughly eradicated. Not a single fragment of his DNA remained anywhere.

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Yogiri, Tomochika, and Mokomoko made it up to the deck of the ship. The boat was listing more and more severely, leaving little doubt that they were sinking.

“What were those pirate morals she was mentioning earlier?” Tomochika asked.

“She did keep her word to leave,” Mokomoko pointed out.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have told her to go,” said Yogiri.

“Well, let’s get out of here! Mokomoko, can you make us a boat?”

“I know it’s kind of late for this,” Yogiri interrupted, “and I’m fine with escaping by boat and all, but where are we escaping *to*?”

“Huh? To the east, right?” Tomochika hadn’t given it much thought.

“To the island of Ent? That’s still pretty far away. We do have quite a bit of food in our bags, but...”

“What else are we supposed to do?”

“I think we should head for land. Whatever’s closest. But I don’t know where that is.”

Tomochika looked around, but even with her fantastic eyesight, she couldn’t see any land nearby. “Should we go back and look for a map?”

“I don’t think we have the time for that.”

“It appears our only option is to create the boat and get out to sea,” the guardian spirit interjected. They didn’t have much time left. As Mokomoko

said, they had no choice but to escape right away.

"Need some help?"

Yogiri turned to see where the voice was coming from and found a familiar-looking boy smiling back at him.

"Who are you again?" He remembered the face but couldn't recall the name.

Tomochika, however, did. "You're Kouryu, right?"

"Right, right, that's what it was."

"Huh? Were you on the boat with us this whole time?!"

"You said I could follow you, remember?"

Yogiri recalled he had indeed told him that. "All right, yes, we have a problem. Will you help us?"

"Sure. I can fly, after all."

"Oh, yeah! I remember you saying something about that!" said Tomochika.

"I mean, I am a dragon."

"Wait, really?!" Tomochika was shocked, having clearly forgotten. Yogiri was starting to remember the story the boy had told them a while back.

"Huh, I was hoping my earlier introduction would have more of an impact..."

"Wasn't there some reason you couldn't fly, though?" Yogiri asked.

"Yes. If I do, I'll get caught by the Sages' alarm system. But if you can fight them off, there's no problem."

"Is that all it was?"

"That's all."

"Well, this is kind of an emergency, so I guess we should take you up on that."

Yogiri was a little concerned. If he responded to an attack coming their way by killing the local Sage, the Philosopher's Stone he or she held would lose its power. If their goal was to obtain the stones, that kind of ruined their chances. But he also felt like he needed to prioritize getting off the sinking ship.

"Oh, so you're one of those long, skinny dragons," Tomochika said.

Kouryu's transformation had been instantaneous. In the blink of an eye, he had taken on the form of an actual dragon. As Tomochika said, he looked like the dragons of Far Eastern tradition back home.

“I wonder where that reverse scale is...” Yogiri recalled stories of dragons having a single scale that grew in backwards.

“It’s near the tail in Monster Hunter, right?”

“Don’t touch it!”

With that, Yogiri, Tomochika, and Mokomoko (in Enju’s android body) climbed onto the creature’s back.

“All right, here we go.”

Kouryu lifted gently into the air. Despite the speed with which he cut through the sky, they didn’t feel the wind. Yogiri had worried they might get blown off, but it didn’t seem like that would be a problem.

“Oh, by the way, I can’t fly all that far, so sorry in advance.”

“Couldn’t you have told us before we were in the air?!”

It seemed there were still plenty of reasons to worry.

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Chapter 25 — A Chainsaw Automatically Appears on the Edge of the Shield!

"So, this kid can kill just by thinking it, huh?"

"Yeah, it's like a cheat. An instant death cheat."

After revealing the truth to Youko, Malna and Rilna stayed to watch what happened aboard the ship. They were interested in what Youko would do next, but just as it seemed like she was about to make her move, she was casually killed off. After meeting the boy with the power of instant death, Yogiri Takatou, she had been wiped out in retaliation. Then Yogiri had killed everyone else who attacked him, met up with his friends, and, despite some trouble along the way, killed almost every enemy he encountered and left the ship behind.

"Looks like there is still one of those dragons around. I thought they disappeared ages ago."

"Right? I thought they had all run away after we beat them."

"So what should we do about Yogiri?"

"What *should* we do? He keeps killing all the people we specially prepared."

"Yeah. It's kind of annoying. It feels like we're losing at something."

These girls could safely say that they were responsible for controlling the entire world. If they decided to kill someone, they knew a mere human would have had no chance against them. In short, they could kill him any time they wanted.

But as gods, they felt like that was admitting defeat. It was unacceptable for a god to strike down a person just because they didn't like them. When it came to this world, their powers bordered on omnipotence, but that didn't mean they should use them however they saw fit. If they did, the world would lose its sense of order. As those responsible for managing the world, they would be seen as failures. Their standing among the other gods would decline, and people would begin to doubt them.

Although Malna and Rilna appeared to do whatever they pleased, they actually thought through everything very carefully.

“Then let’s get something new ready for Yogiri!”

“Yeah! We can totally afford something new!”

“Do we have any spending money left?”

“Uhh, I think we spent a bit too much last time.”

“Okay, let’s keep it reasonable, then!”

“Yeah. We should be able to do a few people!”

“So, what kind of character should we make next?”

“Hmm. Maybe we should just do a transport with a bonus after all.”

“Picking someone from a minority and giving them powers is always a good option too!”

“There’s also reincarnation, but waiting for them to grow up takes so long.”

“Why not force them to mature right after being born?”

“That’s pointless! What would be the point in having them reincarnate?!”

“I was thinking...”

“What?”

“People who get carried away are no good, are they?”

“I know what you mean!”

“But watching those kinds of people is so much more fun.”

“Yeah, I totally get it!”

“People who were boring in their previous world are no good, are they?”

“Yeah. You really need to be more carefree than that.”

“What do you call it? Going on the defensive?”

“They say they want to live a slow life, but, like, it just makes you want to say ‘Why are you even here? Are you making fun of this world or something?’”

“Yeah, it really does, doesn’t it?!”

“Let’s go say that next time, then!”

“Yeah, let’s do that!”

“Oh, we kind of got off track.”

“Yeah, we did. We were thinking about the Yogiri killer.”

“Maybe we should pay a visit to the market while we think about it. We might find a good bargain.”

“Should we think about an ability to give them first?”

“Hmm, there might be a good character at the market already. Maybe we should think of what direction we want to go in first.”

“Yeah, it might be better to pick a character based on the power we have in mind.”

“Or if we find a good deal, we can pick a power that fits them.”

“All right, let’s just try this one and see what we can add.”

Malna picked one person at random, and Rilna immediately agreed.

“So, what do we give them?”

“I guess we need something to beat instant death.”

“Yeah, we need instant death resistance, don’t we?”

“So a super resilient type, I guess? We’ve never tried that before.”

“Let’s get all the resistance skills!”

“Petrification, poison, sleep, paralysis, instant death, freeze, burn, charm. That should be all the status effects, right?”

“And obviously we need auto healing and auto revival.”

“I also kind of want to add an ultimate defense field. I really like that effect, where it’s like *ping*! And everything just bounces off.”

“You mean something that just ignores a certain amount of damage, right?”

“We need to set their growth to max defense!”

“If you do that, their attack power won’t go up at all. Are you sure?”

“It’s fine. We’ll also give them this skill: Full Counter!”

“So their only way to attack is to counter? Won’t they both end up just doing the same thing?”

“Let’s give them Shield Bash too.”

“Oh, then let them use two shields!”

“Heh heh. Twin shield style!”

“Oh, we could put shields on their feet too.”

“Then both hands and feet, quad shield style!”

“We could put one on their back too...”

“That’s just too much.”

“I think four is already too much. They’re just going to be a walking stack of shields!”

“Oh, let’s put some spikes on the shields.”

“Wait, what? When they hold a shield, spikes are going to grow out of them?!”

“Yeah. You’re gonna get stabbed. You’re gonna get super stabbed!”

“Okay! If we’re doing that, I want to add a chainsaw too!”

“Where?”

“To the shield.”

“That’s not a shield anymore! But that sounds cool, so I guess it’s fine!”

“Okay then, so a chainsaw automatically appears on the edge of the shield!”

“I want to see them throw it. We can let them throw it, right?!”

“Then let’s make it come back to them automatically!”

“They could ride it too, then, right?”

“Okay, so they travel around by riding the shield.”

“How? They throw the shield and then jump on it?”

“Yeah, totally. They jump on it really fast!”

“That’s pretty clever.”

“Super clever!”

“But it can only go in a straight line, right?”

“Yeah, since it’s just an ability to make the shield come back when you throw it.”

And so the goddesses Malna and Rilna found a random person, who would suddenly discover they had manifested mysterious powers.

MY INSTANT DEATH ABILITY IS SO OVERPOWERED, NO ONE IN THIS OTHER WORLD STANDS A CHANCE AGAINST ME!

Side Story

Land of the Dead

Its power was so immense, it was unthinkable that anything could compare to it. Its ability to kill everything would make it appear invincible at a glance.

In fact, killing it was impossible. No matter how fast the attack was, or if it was from a range the eye couldn't track, or if it was so indiscriminate as to destroy the entire world, none of it would work. If one thought to kill it, they would definitely be struck down in retaliation, meeting certain death. There was no way to remove it from the world or to escape its power. It covered the entire realm, and everything was in its hands. There was no doubt that some would come to view such a being as a god.

But it was not a flawless being. It had an obvious weakness. No matter how extreme its power was, it was still just a human in the end. It wasn't omniscient or omnipotent. And as a being with a human heart, its mind could be nothing but human. It could easily be shaken, confused, panicked, or terrified. The heart was the only weakness of that otherwise invincible being. With that knowledge, one could guide it and possibly even tame it. One could frighten it, confuse it, lead it astray.

When it was a young child absolutely dependent on its parents, the people it loved had died right in front of its eyes, and the child couldn't take it. They had been destroyed so tragically, so cruelly, that one could tell at a glance they would never move again.

What had motivated someone to do such a thing in that village? Just seeing what was left behind, it was hard to say. But the end result was the worst possible outcome: it had lost its mind. Its small world had been thoroughly destroyed, throwing everything into chaos, leaving it wandering alone in the darkness.

Nothing would have happened if it had been left alone, but instead it had been transformed into a storm of indiscriminate death.

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A man in the robes of a Buddhist priest walked through a suburban city. His name was Dougen. He had been called to help deal with the monster that had been released from a nearby village.

He was heading for the mountains in the north and was currently in the prefectural capital, so it was a lively setting. However, if one looked a little farther away, they would see only mountain wilderness. Somewhere within those mountains was *that thing*. Apparently, it was still a young child, so naturally its pace was slow, and it was still wandering through the wilds. Only one settlement had been wiped out so far. If they could resolve the incident with limited damage, things could be said to have gone well. But if it reached a populated area, the damage would escalate dramatically. They needed to stop it before that happened.

Dougen decided to head straight for where it was. The organization he belonged to took it upon themselves to safeguard the world. They exterminated supernatural beings that brought harm to humans, sealed them away, and maintained peace from behind the scenes. Given their guiding principle, they could hardly ignore what was happening.

"Not that we believe anything can really be done about that child..."

At some point, the bewitching woman in the loose kimono had appeared alongside him.

"Are you sure you're okay being seen by other people?"

"With this outfit, everyone will think I'm just doing that 'cosplay' thing, right? If people talk to us, I'll act like a fox, and they'll believe it in a second."

Her clothing was anachronistic, and she had fox ears growing out of her head. As she said, most who saw her would think she was in costume.

"Is there really nothing you people can do?" he asked her.

"Nothing at all. Well, even if there was, we'd be on the boy's side anyway."

"That one guy's name was Shidou, right? Can he do anything?"

Masamichi Shidou. He had called himself the head of the Restricted Territory Disaster Management Task Force. As a member of a branch family of the one that controlled the village, he had leaped into action after the main family had been wiped out. He had said the family had passed down some ancient teachings regarding the monster, but he hadn't divulged any specific information during the briefing.

“Where exactly am I supposed to put this?” The woman had a headset in her hands, one of the devices the Task Force had given out for wireless communications.

“How should I know?!” Dougen spat. He had one as well. He would receive orders on how to deal with that thing through it.

“I don’t think there’s anything we can do. My first thought was to wait for him to exhaust himself and fall asleep. I wonder if Shidou had a similar idea.”

“But there wasn’t anything even resembling a plan.”

The Task Force had gathered a great number of people specialized in dealing with the supernatural. Dougen had thought they would work together as a unit, but they had all been told to deal with the situation on their own.

“They all seemed like awfully untrustworthy people to me. Trying to get them to work together was a lost cause from the start.”

“I suppose they weren’t well-suited to working as a group,” he admitted.

While they were all powerful individuals, everyone involved seemed to be strange, egotistical, eccentric people. It was unlikely they would be able to cooperate in such an impromptu fashion. Rather than trying to force them to work together, letting each one work in their own way was more likely to produce results.

“Well, whatever. The only thing we can do is head there ourselves,” Dougen continued.

Sitting around thinking about it wouldn’t solve anything. First they needed to head to the location and get a grasp on the situation. They might find a solution by doing that.

“Are you worried about your health or something?” Though he had sped up, the fox-eared woman kept up with him.

“What do you mean?”

“I was just wondering. The mountain is still pretty far away. Why not use a taxi or something?”

“I don’t have money to waste.”

“Is that so?” As she spoke, the woman waved down a taxi. “It doesn’t especially concern me if more humans die, but I feel like we should probably avoid wasting time, no?”

“I have no intention of working with you.”

“Come now, even bitter enemies sometimes must share the same boat,

right? It's my treat, so hurry up and get in."

"Do you actually have money? You didn't just transform some leaves or something, did you?"

"That's just a fairy tale. Of course I have something real."

She pulled a credit card from her sleeve.

◇ ◇ ◇

There existed those who fought against creatures that defied understanding. Superhumans, youkai, demons, otherworlders, aliens—according to common sense, none of them should have existed. They were scientifically impossible. But even if they were impossible, even if one didn't believe in them, there *were* things in this world that didn't seem like they could be anything but unnatural.

While it wasn't certain that those beings were what they claimed to be, the fact that they were inflicting real harm meant they needed to be dealt with. When fighting against creatures that were hard to understand, there were those who used similarly incomprehensible powers, but from among them, two brothers used particularly pragmatic means.

In short: firearms. The bullets, bearing blessings and incantations of exorcism, could shoot down the most otherworldly beings. The brothers themselves didn't believe in God or Buddha, but they did understand that the bullets were effective. In exchange for money, they could acquire projectiles capable of taking down monsters. To them, that's all it was. Whatever the monster, if you filled it with enough lead, it would eventually stop moving.

While getting themselves properly equipped within Japan was something of a problem, it could be solved with enough money. There were few who were capable of dealing with monsters. The market was somewhat of an oligopoly, so there were any number of high-paying jobs available.

Getting rid of the monster known as Lord Okakushi was one of those jobs.

Right now, the brothers were on a cliff overlooking the settlement. It was the commune of some cult, a self-sufficient village isolated from the rest of society.

"How does it look?" the older brother asked, crouching down on his knees. The younger one was on his stomach, looking through the scope of his sniper rifle.

“A number of people who look like believers are lying on the ground here and there. They’re probably dead.”

“And the kid?”

“He’s wandering aimlessly through the fields.”

The boy in white robes was walking slowly, the only one still moving in the settlement.

Their target.

“They had to be exaggerating, making such a big deal about killing one kid.”

They had asked the Task Force what sort of ability the boy possessed. Apparently, it was some kind of curse that let him kill people just by willing it. But aside from that power, he was an ordinary boy. No matter what kind of power he possessed, all they had to do was shoot him through the head before he knew they were there.

“Seriously. Exterminating the whole cult would have been a more interesting job.”

“They were definitely planning something here. That looks like a chemical plant. They must have been making something dangerous.”

Still, no matter how suspicious the village’s activities might have been, they were humans, and that put them outside the scope of the brothers’ work.

“Well, right now we need to worry about the kid. Any word from the Task Force?”

“They’re saying to get closer.” The older brother was wearing the wireless headset. They had confirmed they’d found the target, but those were the only instructions that had come back so far.

“What’s the point? We could just shoot him from here and end it.”

Climbing down and approaching would be a pain, and pointless. There were no problems with the weather, and the distance between them wasn’t that great. With the younger brother’s marksmanship skills, there was no chance he would miss.

“Then can I just shoot him?”

“Yeah. I’ll leave the timing to you.”

The younger brother put his finger on the trigger, then stopped. For a short time, the older brother waited. He thought his sibling was being more cautious than usual, but there were a number of factors that played into making the shot. He thought the other man was just waiting for the right

moment.

But the shot never came, so he eventually called out, “Hey, what’s wrong?”

There was no reply.

“Hey, you didn’t fall asleep, did you?”

Touching a sniper while he was tracking a target was a bad idea, but his brother was still offering no response. The older man reached out to touch him. The lack of any resistance sent a chill through him, urging him to shake his brother harder.

He was dead. Without any warning, his brother had suddenly died.

At the time, no one had known much about the boy’s power. They had thought it was merely some supernatural curse to cause death and had optimistically assumed that if they weren’t noticed, they would have no problem. They only learned about his ability to detect killing intent, and the fact that distance meant nothing to him, after this event.

◇ ◇ ◇

Asaka Takatou and Yogiri were walking their dog through the village. Although it was an underground cavern made to look like the outdoors, it was extremely spacious, so they weren’t lacking when it came to places to walk. Asaka had thought that wandering around aimlessly would be boring, but Yogiri seemed to be enjoying himself.

“What is this place anyway?” Asaka asked.

“Isn’t it a village?”

“No, I mean this space. Isn’t it a bit huge? I wouldn’t think they could dig out a place this big.” The enormous place they were in was underground. Asaka didn’t feel like current levels of technology would allow for something like it. “Maybe they did it with some crazy new tech.”

In this place, technologies that seemed like nothing more than dreams on the surface were commonplace. For example, the villagers working in the fields nearby were bipedal autonomous robots controlled by high-level AI, and they seemed very human in appearance and behavior. Even now she found it hard to believe they were robots. They were clearly on a different level from any robot on the surface.

She shrugged. “I guess there’s no point in worrying about it.”

The two of them walked through the tranquil village, eventually coming to a comparatively large structure.

“I wonder what that is. Do you know, Yogiri?”

“No idea.”

It wasn’t like Yogiri knew everything about the village. After all, until Asaka had arrived, he had basically never left the mansion.

Her interest piqued, Asaka approached the building. It was surrounded by a fence, and a signboard was up by the gate.

“An elementary branch school? They even set up something like this down here?”

In order to replicate the village on the surface, they had recreated the buildings, fields, and even the forest. So this building had likely been on the surface at one point as well.

Asaka and Yogiri stepped through the gate. Beyond the compact schoolyard was a two-story building. “It really does look like a branch school, doesn’t it?”

The wooden structure looked thoroughly aged and was large enough to handle about ten students.

“Hey, Asaka, can we play here?”

Asaka thought for a bit. It was almost evening, so she would need to start working on dinner soon. If she let him play, she’d need to leave him and go back alone.

“Okay. Make sure you’re home by dinner.”

But she hardly thought of that as a problem. This whole space was made for Yogiri. It wasn’t like they had to worry about perverts showing up, and although some suspicious people did find their way down from time to time, his power was more than enough to deal with them.

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The schoolyard had metal horizontal bars and rubber tires embedded in the ground to play with. It wasn’t a whole lot, but for Yogiri, it was all new and interesting. He inspected them for a while but had no idea how to actually use them.

Stepping up to the bars, he tentatively touched them. They were firmly set into the ground and wouldn’t budge. First he tried holding on to one with

both hands and hanging from it. Bending his knees so his feet didn't reach the ground, he swung back and forth. He felt like he was doing something wrong, but it was still kind of fun.

"What are you doing? That's so weird."

Turning towards the voice, Yogiri saw a girl in red clothes.

"Who are you?"

"Kiyomi. And who are you? You don't go to this school, do you?"

"I'm Yogiri. Sorry for using this without permission."

"I think it's fine." Kiyomi stepped up beside him, grabbing the bar. Lifting herself up, she twirled forward around it. "This is how you're supposed to do it. You didn't know?"

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“No.”

“Really? Then what about this?” Kiyomi proudly showed off more techniques, like backflipping around the bar and spinning forward around her knees.

“That’s amazing!”

“Really? It’s pretty easy if you try.”

With her guidance, Yogiri was able to do the same backflip right away.

“Takashi can spin around over and over, though.”

“Really? Hey, how do you use those?” Yogiri pointed towards the tires.

“Like a vaulting horse.”

“What’s a vaulting horse?”

“Okay, I’ll just show you. Watch.” Kiyomi headed over to the tires, putting both hands on one. Then, with a small jump, she leapfrogged over it.

“I see.” Yogiri tried to imitate what she had done. The tires were pretty low to the ground, so it was easy to jump over them.

While they were doing that, the schoolyard filled with other children.

“Who’s that?” A larger boy stepped over to Yogiri.

“This is Takashi. And this is Yogiri,” Kiyomi introduced them.

“Yogiri, huh? What grade are you in?”

“I think Grade Three. That’s what Asaka said, at least.”

“What do you mean, ‘you think’? Well, it’s fine. Let’s play shadow tag!”

“What’s shadow tag?”

“You don’t even know that?”

“Yogiri doesn’t know anything,” Kiyomi explained. “He’s like a baby, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, he is. And he’s got those fancy clothes.”

Perhaps because it was just a branch school, there was no distinction between grade levels while they were playing. Yogiri played with them, totally absorbed in their games, and before he knew it, the sun was setting.

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Yogiri returned to the mansion around dinner time.

“I’m home.”

“Welcome back. You’ve gotten a bit dirty.”

His clothes were absolutely filthy.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. I guess you should have a bath before we eat.”

Yogiri headed to the bath while Asaka finished up dinner. She had thought he was far too dirty for a kid playing on his own, but maybe that’s just how kids were when they played outside.

She didn’t think much of it.

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“And nothing of note has happened recently?” Shiraishi asked Asaka, who had come up for her regular report. They were in their usual meeting room, and as always it was just the two of them.

“It’s been totally peaceful. Well, I guess something could happen at any moment, so I can’t let my guard down.”

Even if they didn’t venture out, there were some things that might end up wandering into that bizarre underground space. She couldn’t be optimistic enough to assume it would never happen again.

“How about with you? None of those kings of the world have come to mess around, have they?” She wanted to add “for no reason” but didn’t. Yogiri had killed one of those “kings,” so it was to be expected that the others would take notice of him.

“We haven’t seen much in the way of movement from them. But if they took an interest, they’d probably head straight for you guys.”

“What would they even do?”

“Probably nothing, I would think. I can’t imagine them visiting a place where a king died, just out of curiosity.”

“By the way, what’s with that hallway filled with talismans and charms? Are you sure that won’t cause some dangerous incidents?” Asaka couldn’t help but think that their repeated ill fortune might have been caused by that hallway.

“No, that’s totally backwards. It exists to keep those dangerous people out.”

“Shiraishi...you’re a scientist, aren’t you?”

Shiraishi paused. “There are plenty of things in the world that science hasn’t uncovered yet, right?” His gaze had become distant. Apparently, he didn’t like the idea of believing in curses either.

“But even with that, dangerous things are still making it through, aren’t they?” There was the creature that had snuck in through Asaka’s shadow, and that guy claiming to be an angel had made it in with no problem. Its efficacy as a barrier seemed extremely questionable.

“Well, we don’t really know how things like curses and wards work, so we can’t press them for that much in the way of certainty...”

“So they’re completely useless, then.”

“Anyway, you ended up coming pretty late today. Will everything be okay for lunch with Yogiri?”

Shiraishi bluntly attempted to change the subject. Asaka had rushed up to the surface, having overslept.

“We’ve got Cup Noodles down there, so I’m sure he’ll be fine.” They had food that could be eaten without any preparation, so she wasn’t especially worried. “Oh, speaking of which... Not that anything happened, but there’s a branch school downstairs. I was thinking of having Yogiri study there. Do you think that would be a problem?”

Lately, Yogiri had been going off to play at the school by himself a lot. It wasn’t an especially interesting place, but he had taken quite a liking to it for some reason. Asaka thought that maybe he’d find studying there more interesting as well.

“A branch school?”

“No good? It’s not like it’s a big deal, but where we study doesn’t really change much, does it?”

“No, if it’s in the village, we don’t really care what you do.”

“Then it’s all right?”

“But what do you mean, ‘branch school’?”

“The elementary branch school. The one on the edge of the village.”

“Are you sure there’s a school down there?”

“Huh?” Asaka stared back at Shiraishi, a chill running down her back.

“Hold on a second... Here we go. This is a map from when the village was built. There may be some differences in the details, but there’s no way a building that large wouldn’t be on it.”

Shiraishi turned the laptop around to show Asaka the screen. In the spot where she had expected to see the elementary school, there was nothing at all.

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When Nikori suddenly started barking, Yogiri stepped out into the front yard.

"What's wrong?"

Nikori was staring at one part of the yard and barking.

"Yogiri! Let's play!" A girl was standing just outside, calling for him.

"Oh, it's Kiyomi. Okay. Do you want to play here? I have some video games."

"No, let's go to the school."

"But I'm going to have to eat lunch soon."

"Then let's eat at school. We have school lunch. They even give us pudding!"

"School lunch?"

"We all eat lunch together in the classroom. It's fun!"

Yogiri thought for a bit. Asaka had just left. If it was the same regular report as always, she wouldn't be back for at least two hours. If he waited for her to get home, it would be well past lunchtime. In that case, he would only have what was in the house to eat, but there should be no problem if he went and ate with Kiyomi and the other students instead.

"Is there enough for me?"

"Don't worry, we always have leftovers."

"Okay, let's go. Nikori, please watch the house for me."

Nikori had been growling the whole time, but after Yogiri said that, she calmed down.

Yogiri followed Kiyomi to the school. It was his first time actually going inside the building. The interior seemed to be even more rundown than the exterior. When he made it to the classroom, that impression was only strengthened. It looked like it had been abandoned for decades.

There were about ten children inside, sitting at their desks. One student in a white coat was pushing a cart with a large pot on it. The children formed a line, so Yogiri joined them. Taking their food on trays, they went back to their seats. The menu was curry with rice, sauerkraut, milk, and pudding.

"Go ahead and eat!" Kiyomi said, stepping up beside him.

"What about you?"

"I'm fine."

"Actually, where's the teacher?" Yogiri knew enough to know there should have been a teacher in the school. He would have thought the teacher

would eat with them.

"Just go ahead and eat. If you want, you can have my pudding too!" Ignoring his question, she continued to pester him.

Though he had his doubts, since it was his first chance at a school lunch, he went ahead and scooped some of the curry up to his mouth. It wasn't particularly good or bad, just sort of ordinary.

"You ate it," Kiyomi said, her voice going flat.

"Yes."

"I saw."

"He swallowed it all."

A number of voices rang out, and suddenly everything outside the windows turned red. He couldn't see the others' faces anymore.

"Now Yogiri is one of us."

"We can keep playing forever."

"Everyone together."

"You can't go home anymore."

"We'll be together forever and ever."

The students had completely changed. The calm, quiet atmosphere had vanished.

"I'm going home," Yogiri said, getting up from his seat. Something felt very wrong. As he made to leave, laughter erupted all around him. It sounded like far more than ten people, coming from inside and outside the classroom. The other students started to turn blurry. They didn't look like people anymore.

Yogiri opened the classroom door. As he walked through the hallway, the jeering laughter turned to confusion. Exiting the building, he made his way into the schoolyard. Though it was supposed to be noon, the sky was bloodred. Angry, wordless roars resounded around him. Roars filled with confusion, bewilderment, and resentment.

"How?! How did you get out?!"

Kiyomi stood in front of him, blocking his path. Yogiri wasn't quite sure what she was asking. He hadn't been locked inside, nor had he been restrained in any way. It would have been stranger if he hadn't been able to leave.

"You definitely ate it! You ate the food of the dead!"

"It was good. Thanks for the meal."

He had only eaten a single bite, but he thought he should be polite anyway. Maybe they had tried to prank him by putting something weird in his food. That would explain why they were so insistent that he eat it. But even if it had gone rotten or if they had put poison in it, that didn't mean much to Yogiri. Anything that posed a danger to him would be killed and rendered powerless.

"What are you?!" Kiyomi shouted before going blurry and disappearing.

Yogiri felt sad. He hadn't intended to do anything to her, but she had clearly intended to hurt him. So she had been erased. Maybe she had never had a physical body in the first place.

Exiting the schoolyard through the gate, he turned around. All that was behind him was an empty lot.

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Asaka ran to the edge of the village. There was no branch school there after all. Just like they had seen on the map, it was just an empty lot. Yogiri was standing at the end of the path, staring at the open space.

"Yogiri! Are you okay?!"

"Oh, you're back." As Asaka called out to him, he turned to her. She didn't know what had happened, but his expression seemed a little lonely.

"Uhh, there was a school here, right?"

"Yeah. There was, but it disappeared."

So she had been right. "Was there someone here?"

"Yeah. I thought it would be nice to be friends."

Yogiri had never mentioned that he'd met someone there. Asaka had no intention of getting angry at him over that. Kids had their own secrets to keep, she figured.

"There have been a lot of strange things happening here recently. We should be careful."

Maybe something had changed when Asaka had arrived, but despite this place being designed to isolate Yogiri, weird things had been happening over and over. That couldn't have been a good thing. If they stayed there, something might happen that they couldn't undo.

Perhaps it would have been best for Asaka to run away while she had the chance. *But...*

“Yeah. I’ll keep you safe, though!” Yogiri smiled.
Asaka just couldn’t bring herself to abandon Yogiri like that.

Afterword

And that is volume six! Thank you for reading. The manga version seemed to be well received, so we will be releasing a second volume! I heard the second volume of the manga will be released on March 21st, so it will probably be on shelves shortly before this book comes out. Please give it just as much love as the novel version!

Now then, I always struggle to think of what to write for these afterwords, but this time I have the Reader Submission Project to talk about, so I think that will take up enough space. Oh, this part will have spoilers, so please read it after you read the rest of the book.

First of all, the Instant Death Cheat Content Collection Project (VRRPG Videos): we took submissions for content for the videos made by Youko Hiiragi within the story. We used them in volume six, so the deadline is already over. I said I would thank everyone who contributed in the afterword, so allow me to do that now.

Nao (checking how far you can go erotically)

Intel (searching for items and equipment inside someone else's house)

Iichiko Chikuno (turning the city into an empty lot)

Yusha☆ (digging forever)

Panda (taking women and children hostage to force the men to do what you say)

These are the ideas that I used. I took some of them exactly as they were and changed some of them a bit, so please understand.

Second, the Instant Death Cheat Content Collection Project 2 (BS Cheats). From volume seven onwards, Malna and Rilna will give powers to some people, and I'd like to collect your ideas for that. If you read volume 6, chapter 25, "A Chainsaw Automatically Appears on the Edge of the Shield!" you should get a good idea of the kinds of powers I'm looking for. To put it simply:

"Powers that the goddesses Malna and Rilna thought up to try and beat the power of instant death (but they didn't think about it that seriously)."

Well, no matter what the power is, it's going to lose to the instant death cheat, so even if you write something like, "They are totally invincible! Even instant death doesn't work on them!" you'll just get a response like, "Too bad! They died anyway!" as if I didn't understand at all. As such, thinking of powers that could actually beat it would be boring, so I would like to request more random BS cheat powers. I won't be able to offer any sort of reward for these entries, but I will record your names in the afterword if we use your submission.

While I am accepting submissions online as well, people who would like to make their submissions there can just search for it, so here I'd like to explain where to send physical letters. Because if I write out the address, it will take up even more space!

Please send them to:

〒141-0021

Tokyo-to Shinagawa-ku Kamiosaki 3-1-1

Meguro Central Square 5F

Earth Star Novels Editorial Department Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

Also, please send questions for the volume 6 bonus side story "Question Corner" to the same address. I always struggle to think of what I should write for the bonus stories in each volume, so even silly questions would be a great help. Also, if you have any suggestions for what I should be writing in these afterwords, please feel free to send those in as well. Seriously, anything at all! If I can't come up with anything to talk about, it'll end up just looking like a diary entry.

Moving on, I am still accepting submissions for characters to get done in by the instant death cheat. I thought that at this point people would stop sending in such submissions, but I have received some. Thank you, Karin. If the opportunity arises, I will try to use your character from volume 7 onwards...

...though they'll just be dying.

Also, I have to say, reading the fan letters you have all sent me makes it feel like people really are reading these books. Thank you so much.

Next, my thanks:

To my editor. I feel like I caused many scheduling issues this time. Thank you as always.

To the illustrator, Chisato Naruse. Thank you for your wonderful

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illustrations, as usual. I always look forward to seeing them.

Next is volume seven! Right now it seems like we'll have no problem continuing, so thank you for your ongoing support!

Tsuyoshi Fujitaka
藤孝剛志

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Hello, this is the illustrator, Chisato Naruse.
"Instant Death" has already made it to volume six. It seems like we should safely make it to the double digits now!

In this series, many of the characters that I design unfortunately end up dying instantly, but some characters end up unexpectedly having regular occurrences. It really makes me feel like (as a character designer) I can't let my guard down at all.
The prime example would be Hanakawa, but Enju is also one of those cases.

I really took a liking to her design, but who would have thought she would become a body for Mokomoko...

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Every volume, Tomochika's outfit changes, but I promise that's not because I forgot what she wore in the previous book...

After first being transported, she repeatedly changed outfits, but since the capital was destroyed in volume 4, I figured they probably wouldn't have much time to go shopping. So I drew outfits with the idea of her using the clothes she had on hand and other outfits she hadn't tried yet to create new looks.

Once they've reached the new continent and she can go shopping again, she might undergo quite the image change!

Edelgart and Jorge, who appeared in this volume, hadn't had a chance to show up in the illustrations for their first appearances, so I based their looks on the fantastic designs made by Miss Nanto in the first volume of the manga.
Edelgart is so cute.
The second volume of the manga will be released the same month as volume six, by the way!

I hope we will get a chance to meet again next time!

CHISATO NARUSE

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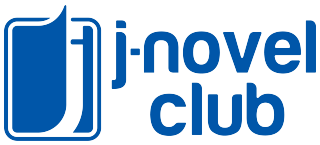

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My Instant Death Ability Is So Overpowered, No One in This Other World Stands a Chance Against Me! Volume 6
by Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

Translated by Nathan Macklem
Edited by Tess Nanavati

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